OSCAR WILDE

R. H. SHERARD

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Oscar Wilde

OSCAR WILDE

Epigram Books
By Mr Monkshood

WOMAN AND THE WITS.
THE CYNIC'S POSY.
WIT AND WISDOM OF EDGAR SALTUS.
THE WORLDLING'S WIT.

OSCAR WILDE

The Story of An Unhappy Friendship

BY

ROBERT H. SHERARD
Author of
"Emile Zola: A Biography,"
"Alphonse Daudet: A Biography," etc., etc.

. . . Nessun maggior dolore
Che ricordarsi del tempo felice
Nella miseria . . . .

"I have saved the bird
in my bosom."
—Last Words of Sir Hugh Percy.

SECOND IMPRESSION

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To

R. R.

In Remembrance
of His Noble Conduct
Towards The Unhappy Gentleman
Who is The Subject of This Memoir, Whom
In Affliction He Comforted, In Prison He Visited,
and In Poverty He Succoured, Thus Showing
an Elevation of Heart and a Loyalty
of Character

This Book is Dedicated

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PREFATORY NOTE

TO ORIGINAL EDITION

PRIVATELY PRINTED

The discreet method of publication which has been adopted for this book will, it is hoped, be accepted as deference to its opinion by that section of the public who, because in a man of genius the allied madness once got the upper hand, would consign him and the works which that genius created to the eternal night of eternal oblivion. A more weighty consideration still, which dictated this course, was to afford no opportunity, by causing a public revival of attention to his name, for those unjust reprisals upon his kinsfolk to which humanity, in this, as in every similar case, needs but the pretext of an incitement. My first chapter explains why the book was written. In this note I wish to point out that my plea for the fairer consideration of my friend —one of the brightest geniuses of the last century — is delivered á huis-clos, *so that none but those invited need listen to it. If any eavesdropper cry "Scandal," he himself will be the cause of it.*

ROBERT HARBOROUGH SHERARD.

Walcote, Upper Norwood, S.E.,
August 7th, 1902.

Oscar Wilde

I

I WAS not by him in the poor room of the poor inn where he died. I had not the consolation of following to the nameless grave the lonely hearse which had no flowers on its pall.

But, as many hundreds of miles away, I read of his solitary death, and heard of the supreme abandonment of him by those to whom also he had always been good, I determined to say all the things that I knew of him, to tell people what he really was, so that my story might help a little to a better understanding of a man of rare heart and rarer genius.

In years to come, people reading his works

will want to know more about him than the evil tradition which his name will evoke; and the student of literature, amazed at the splendour of his art, may be glad that at least one of those who were his friends thought fit to put on record a story which goes to prove the eternal truths that no man who is a true artist can be a bad man at heart, and that an innate love of beauty will always keep alive in the mysterious recesses of the soul a hatred for what is base, a striving for what is noble.

Of the aberration which brought this fine life to shipwreck so pitiful, I have nothing to say. I leave to the physiologists to classify it, to the psychologists to wrangle with the makers of laws over the degree of responsibility which it involves. It is a question altogether in the domains of pathology, and my task is with the artist and the friend alone.

I can disregard, in writing of him, the

cruel and devilish madness which, as people said and to their satisfaction proved, at times actuated him, with all the greater ease, that during the sixteen years of our friendship, by not one word of his, by not one gesture, by not the fleeting shadow of one evil thought, did it betray itself to me in the radiant and splendid gentleman that he was.

I can say now what, in a letter to Sir Edward Clarke at the time of his trial, I offered to say in the Court of the Old Bailey, that during twenty years of communion with the world, of commerce, by profession and standing, with men and women in every rank of life, in many parts and places, I never met a man more entirely pure in conversation, nor one more disdainful of vice in its vulgarity and uncomeliness.

Never there came the faintest suggestion of an unclean thought from those eloquent and inspiring lips; no coarse word ever

soiled them; and if behind the wonderful eyes a demon was indeed crouching, madness here too allied itself with such supreme cunning of dissimulation, that for me, till the very end, he remained the *beau idéal* of a gentleman in all that that word implies of lofty and serene morality.

Men together, after wine, the world over, hasten with delight in conversation to a certain class of pleasantry. The topic is the same over the Turkish cigarette and the white curaçoa as over the clay pipe and the pint of beer, if the language differ. In Oscar Wilde's presence it was understood amongst his friends that who should so jest would commit an unpardonable offence.

It was his supreme delicacy of tongue and manner that won him amongst women such devoted friendships. It is the misfortune of the writer that it is not possible to bring evidence of these many friendships,

but the fact remains that his memory will live long in many a gentle breast as that of a man most chivalrous, whose gallantry inspired him with that profound respect which is to all women their most grateful tribute.

A great French actress once said to me, speaking of him, "What attracted me to Oscar Wilde was that he showed me from the very first that his many kindnesses were not rendered to me for the sake of establishing a claim on my favour, as is the case with nearly every man who comes near us. I found a comrade in him, not a suitor, and a deep and real friendship was possible. It is rarely so between a woman and a man."

These words recurred to me, years later, when, in a smoking-room in a country mansion, I heard a certain noble person who had discevered a copy of Wilde's first book of poems on our host's shelves cry out in horror, and ask to be allowed to

throw it into the fire, "as," he said, "most certainly ought to have been done with the man himself." He was a noble person in a tartan smoking-jacket, a man who, high in royal favour, was eagerly listened to; and during the previous half-hour, in language of which his pestering pipers would have been ashamed, he had discussed the morals of half the women of his set, with illustrations from his own experience of their several frailties.

Oscar Wilde, as I knew him, was the purest man in word and deed that I have ever met. I wished to say this aloud to his judges at a time when it might have served him. I say it now to other judges. And I knew him for sixteen years.

In the copy of "A Ballad of Reading Gaol" which he sent me, he wrote—"In Memory of an old and noble Friendship." These words were the incitement to this book, as they are its justification.

II

As Alphonse Daudet, in telling me a story of his youth, once said to me, so must I say in relating the tale of this my friendship. As in a forest of pine-trees in Southern France there are great black, burnt-up patches, so too in my memory. I have no dates to write by, and of documents only a very few. I can pretend to no biographical exactness. I can give no complete picture; only the picture of him as he impressed himself upon me in the many scenes that rise up before me.

What year was it in which I first met him? I do not know. All I can say is, that it was some long time before the day on which Victor Hugo died, and not long after the

visit of Swinburne to the poet's house. For I remember that I took Wilde to my friend, Madame Lockroy, for presentation to her father-in-law, and was present when the two met. How long ago! Jeanne Hugo was then a little girl, who sat on her grandfather's knee, and the bearded George of to-day was a blushing boy.

I can recall nothing of this meeting, and deduce from this that, as usual in his last days, Victor Hugo, drowsy with incense, did not otherwise distinguish his visitor, and that the words exchanged were the exaggerated commonplaces familiar to the spot. For the rest, the peculiar brilliancy of Oscar Wilde's conversation, as I remarked on many an occasion, appealed far less to Frenchmen of intellect than it did to English folk; and the reason of this is, that the richest wealth of English brilliancy appears to the Frenchman but the small change of wit. I never have met an Englishman yet who

could distinguish himself in a Parisian salon. I have seen many try to do so, and have noted their failure. Phrases on which they seemed to count for certain effect passed as commonplaces, and no one who reads the French dramatists, from Molière to Lavedan, can wonder at this.

Oscar Wilde, who appeared to me the most wonderful talker that the world had ever seen, achieved in this respect no notable success in Paris. Conscious, no doubt, of the great difficulty of the task, he forced the note, o'ervaulted himself, and left an impression of insincerity. Still, when he talked in Paris of literature or art in England, he was readily listened to, and with marked deference. I remember that, that evening at Victor Hugo's house, an eager group surrounded him whilst he discoursed on Swinburne. Vacquerie was most attentive, and other familiars, amongst whom was a Russian princess who was translating

Swinburne's poems into French, hung on his lips in a way which may have reminded him of Mayfair. Victor Hugo, however, was asleep by the fire.

I can also recall a picture of the radiant youth in the house of de Nitis, the exquisite painter of the beauties of the streets of Paris. I can see him leaning against the tapestried wall under the flambeaux, talking of pictures to a number of men, amongst whom were Degas, Cazin, and the Pizarros. Alphonse Daudet, with his wife in a group of ladies, was talking also. I went from one to the other. Many years later it fell to me in London again to leave one for the other. Under what tragic circumstances, I will tell in its place.

A gross Philistine in those days, I could not understand nor appreciate the things that Wilde was saying about pictures to masters who have painted some of the noblest. Did I even listen to them? All that I remember

is with what pleasure I noted from my friend's face and manner, and the attitude of the listeners, that he felt that he was speaking well, and that they were interested.

"I was quite amazing," he said to me, as we walked down the Avenue de Villiers together that night. In different periods of his life he had different catchwords. 'Amazing' was his word in those first days to describe anybody or anything that pleased him. For the contrary, he used the word 'tedious.' 'Rather tedious,' applied to a man or a thing, was the extreme of his condemnation.

If I do not remember the year or the day on which I first met him, the occasion and the circumstances are very fresh in my memory. Before our meeting I felt hostile towards him, with a petty spirit of trade jealousy, *jalousie de boutique*, for which the only excuses that I can find are that I was

very young and very ambitious. I considered that his reputation and success had been won by unworthy artifices, although in my heart of hearts I longed for the ingeniousness and the daring to force attention to myself by similar methods, and fretted that to the ox is not allowed what to Jupiter is conceded.

Of this petty and contemptible feeling I made full confession to my friend in the first days of our acquaintance. "That was very wrong of you," he said, with a laugh; and with geniality and bonhomie he gave me, by the things he said, my first lesson in the acquirement of that serenity of tolerance towards one's fellows without which the life of a man of letters is one of constant fretfulness. To delight in the successes of others as a gain to the commonwealth, to love art for art's sake, and not for the valuations of the *bourgeois*, to console oneself in obscurity with the radiance of brother-artists—to these

things he pointed as the true viaticum on the literary way.

Such, however, was my spite at that time against him, that on receiving an invitation to dine at a house in the Avenue de Ségur at which he was to be present, my first act was to cry out "I certainly shall not go." My second was to write out a telegram of acceptance.

He had recently returned from America, and was then in what he described as his second period. His eccentricities of dress and coiffure had been discarded in accordance with the evolution. He delighted in the elegances of a Lucien de Rubempré, and modelled the arrangement of his hair after a bust of Nero in the gallery of the Louvre. He was then twenty-eight years of age. His affectation of effeminacy, the keynote of his first period, had been thrown aside, with its strange accoutrements. Tall and graceful, one could imagine the athlete behind the

dandy; and though in detail his clean-shaven face was not altogether comely, there was such beauty in the blazing intelligence of his fine eyes that if the first impression he produced was to startle, the second was one of entire admiration.

When he entered the drawing-room of that house in the Avenue de Ségur and was addressing to our hostess, a beautiful Greek artist, the usual compliments, I was taken with a desire of hysterical and irrepressible laughter, and crossed to a corner where John Sargent, the portrait painter, was in conversation with Paul Bourget, to seek a necessary diversion.

It was bad form, certainly, and a gesture from the polished American artist compelled me to master my nerves.

To-day, when I recall the emotion which beset me on entering on a friendship which went nigh to wreck my life, I think of that hero of Beaumarchais who made

haste to laugh lest he should be forced to weep. In my case the solace was unconsciously attained. The tears came later.

We spoke little at dinner. We listened eagerly. He had been received at many houses of prominent artists and writers in Paris, and had delightful things to say. His conversation was as exhilarating as wine; his presence diffused a stimulating atmosphere; we felt ourselves exalted by his joyous enthusiasms.

I had been silent throughout the meal, but at the close I made a remark, blunt, surly, and Philistine, which attracted his attention. He had been speaking of the Louvre, and describing, with what sincerity I cannot say, the sheer physical delight which the Venus of Milo caused him, and I said, "I have never been to the Louvre. When that name is mentioned, I always think of the Grands Magasins du Louvre, where I can get the cheapest ties in Paris."

"I like that," said Oscar Wilde; "that is very fine."

It was above all very foolish, and perhaps not altogether true, but it appeared that the psychology of the second period delighted in materialism as opposed to ideality, and a silly paradox lured one who was abler than anyone else in the setting of these snares.

He thus engaged me in conversation, and attached himself to me for the rest of the evening. Before he left he invited me to dine with him on the morrow at the Hotel Voltaire.

"From your appearance," he afterwards said to me, "your long hair and so forth, I fancied you were Herr Schultze on the violoncello. When you bluntly disclaimed all artistic interests, I discovered that you had scientifically thought out a pose that interested me."

III

THE hotel where Oscar Wilde was living, the Hotel Voltaire, on the Quai Voltaire, was in those days in one of the most charming spots in Paris. That was before the Government had ravaged the quays on the left bank, felling the trees, and chasing away booksellers and bookhunters from their open-air market.

"The Quai Voltaire," said Alphonse Daudet to me, in the last conversation I had with him, "is the writer's true quarter in Paris. The happiest hours of my youth were spent there."

Oscar Wilde had a suite of rooms on the second floor, with a fine view over the Seine and of the Louvre.

I remarked upon the beauty of the sight.

"Oh," said he, "that is altogether immaterial, except to the innkeeper, who, of course, charges it in the bill. A gentleman," he added, "never looks out of the window."

"It was a pity for the Huguenots," I said, after awhile, pointing to a certain window in the palace over the water, "that Charles, ninth of the name, did not remember that."

In the daytime, when he was at work, he dressed in a white dressing-gown fashioned after the monkish cowl that Balzac used to wear at his writing-table. At that time he was modelling himself on Balzac. Besides the dressing-gown, he had acquired an ivory cane with a head of turquoises—turkis-stones we used to call them—which was a replica of the famous walking-stick which Honoré de Balzac used to carry when love had transformed the recluse into a fop, and he went a-wooing his Polish wife—"La Canne de Monsieur de Balzac," in short, about which

Delphine Gay was so very pleasant in her husband's gazette.

But he was not borrowing from the master these foibles of toilette alone. I think that at that time he was striving in earnest to school himself into labour and production. He was sated with social success, and had fixed a high ambition to carve out for himself a great place in English letters, the place which he surely might have won had adversity come to him much earlier and in a different form. He had inspired himself with that passage in *La Cousine Bette* in which Balzac declares that constant labour is the law of art as it is the law of life, for art is creation idealised, and points to the fact that all great artists have been unresting workers such as Voltaire in his study and Canova in his studio.

Oscar Wilde was making a real effort to imitate in his industry and devotion to his art, the great worker whose fopperies he

played with. I do not think, however, that his resolution maintained itself, for I remember that, reading *La Cousine Bette* at that time, I came across a passage which follows close on the one in which Balzac lays down the law of art, which seemed to me altogether to apply to my new friend—the passage where Balzac describes those semi-artists *qui passent leur vie à se parler.* Yet, then and in later life, he had the desire of industry, if not the power of enforcing discipline of self. He has often said to me regretfully, after speaking of pleasures and triumphs, "I ought not to be doing this. I ought to be putting black upon white—black upon white." The last time on which he said this to me was in his study in Tite Street, where a notable article of furniture was Carlyle's writing-table. I doubt not that when he bought it, it was with the hope that the sight of it, recalling memories of Titanic labour, might help his wavering

resolution. In the great pathos of his life and death, I have few remembrances more pathetic than that of this dressing-gown and that writing-table, symbols of a self-confessed weakness, for were they not used as fetishes against idleness by one who knew only too well the real fetish to use?

Amongst the books strewed about the room on the Quai d'Orsay were biographies of Balzac, books of the gossipy class, full of personalia, "Balzac in Slippers," and so forth—text-books with which to study a part.

On his writing-table, which was decorated with flowers, was, for an ash-tray, a large porcelain bowl, for the cigarette never left him. A pile of sheets of costly paper, covered with delicate penmanship, showed that he had been working. On the mantel-piece was a photogravure of that picture by Puvis de Chavannes which shows the nude, meagre, nut-breasted form of a young girl sitting up on her unravelled shroud, her eyes

wide open in startled wonder,—a village graveyard indicated on a remote mountain-side. Hope was it?—or a Resurrection?

He gave me this engraving, and on the mounting wrote a favourite device, a paradox also, "*Rien n'est vrai que le beau.*" He told me in detail how it should be framed, in grey, with a narrow line of vermilion. I noticed how he mouthed the word 'vermilion' with the keen enjoyment of a man tasting Imperial Tokay, who rolls the wine on his tongue, and lingers with delight upon its perfumed gold. For he always had a very evident sensuality for coloured and sonorous words. Also, as is the case with many artists in letters, there were words which caused him real physical annoyance—those neologisms, for instance, which end in 'ette.'

When I think over his life, I feel assured that the days when I first met him were the happiest days he lived. He was free from material care, he was in full physical and

mental vigour, and, under the mild discipline which he had laid upon himself, he was working at his best. During the time that he spent at the Hotel Voltaire he finished his play "The Duchess of Padua," and wrote those two wonderful poems "The Harlot's House" and "The Sphynx." I was with him all the time that they were being elaborated. I heard him fashion the lines, often repeating, as we walked abroad, passages that had pleased him in their writing. He was agreeably taken with the sound of the words—

"Am I not Duchess here in Padua?"

—from his play, and he often quoted them.

I remember that for "The Sphynx" he asked me for a rhyme in 'ar' for a lagging verse. I can recall the accent with which he often repeated his request, and chid me with the question "Why have you brought me no rhyme from Passy?" It recurred to

me when, after his calamity, first meeting him, he said in a similar tone and with like insistance, "Why have you brought me no poison from Paris?—poison from Paris—poison from Paris?"

On the day when I had found 'nenuphar' for the wanting rhyme, I was made as proud by his thanks as though I had achieved great things in literature. We may have been precious and ridiculous on the occasion but I know that we were very much in earnest. Neither for him nor for me was there anything outside of literature. We had desire for nothing but literary achievement. It seemed the one thing to be coveted. He was twenty-eight and I was twenty-two.

I had dressed for that first dinner to which he had invited me. He had desired me to do so, although we were to dine at a restaurant. He had spent an hour that evening at a hairdresser's, as was his daily

custom, and I found him curled and resplendent. This delight in beautifying himself proceeded entirely from the most innocent joyousness of life. It was a token of triumph in happy vitality, and in somewise also the defiance of an artist to the moneyed *bourgeoisie.* To show amazingly, was to impress the Philistines with due respect for letters, ragged and pitiable no longer, but curled and scented, and in costly raiment.

We dined in luxury at Foyot's in the Rue de Tournon, and at the outset of the dinner we agreed that one should speak of yellow wine, not white. What our conversation was I have no recollection, but I fancy that he must have launched some paradoxes in connection with the psychology of the second period, which found interest, and hence beauty, in everything,—paradoxes which aroused my surliness, for I remember rubbing my cigar-end into the coffee in my

saucer, and asking him bluntly if he saw any beauty in the mess before him.

He said, "Oh, yes. It makes quite an effective brown," quite pleasantly; but in his eyes there was just a glint of ill-humour at my implied doubt of his sincerity—the warning, *Ne touchez pas à la reine.*

For the rest, that was one of the very rare occasions during the whole course of our long amity in which even the shadow of a dissension fell between us. Indeed, I can remember only one instance when he spoke to me with irritation, and that was once at the Café Royal in London, when inadvertently I spoiled a story he was telling by suggesting its dénouement.

After the dinner at Foyot's we went to the cafés of the Latin Quarter, and afterwards we walked about Paris. Our conversation was of literature only. At one time in the night we were standing opposite Notre Dame, admiring the wonderful sight of the cathedral

under moonlight. The monstrous gargoyles seemed affrighted by its clearness, and the symbol suggested such reflections to the poet that I felt that conscience was very strong within him.

Again, we were walking past the dismantled palace of the Tuileries, and here he said too, "There is not there one little blackened stone which is not to me a chapter in the Bible of Democracy."

I left him at two o'clock in the morning at the door of his hotel, and we were loth to part. It was agreed between us that we were to be good friends, and we fixed a meeting for the early morrow.

IV

In the sequence, and during the six weeks which preceded my departure for London, my whole time almost was spent in his company. It was for me a new and joyous life, an unending feast of the soul, and each day my admiration for my new friend grew more enthusiastic. By nature, heredity, and environment, disposed to melancholy, viewing mankind and life as Calvin may have viewed them, this joyous Celt showed me the gladness of things, suggested the possibility of great and buoyant happiness in the world, and with his exuberant vitality scattered the black butterflies that enclouded my spiritual vision. It was perhaps because we were altogether so dissimilar that we were from

the very first so attracted one to the other; and I may say that he professed for me the same friendship, and in some degree also the same admiration, that I most truly felt for him. Yet I made as little attempt to conceal my faults, to tone down the asperities of my individuality in his presence, as though, in reputation, gifts and qualities, we had been altogether equal. Nor did I ever flatter him in his views and tendencies, where these were divergent from mine. It was this quality, perhaps, that attracted him to me.

I remember saying to him one day, "Your faults and your weaknesses are so apparent, that it would almost be more profitable to be your enemy than your friend. It would be so easy to attack you, and could be done to such good purpose."

To-day, when I think of him as he always was, I wonder what can have been the foibles which suggested that remark to me,

for I cannot recall a single point in his character which could inspire or foster enmity; and when catastrophe came upon him, what most of all astounded me was the volume of the base rancour that in so many breasts, lying upgathered, then burst forth upon him. For I cannot conceive that he excited jealousy. His superiority was so evident that rivalry could not surely raise its head on his path; and the success he won, as contrasted with what, by his parts, he might have achieved, was such as to inspire condolence rather than envy. Yet, jealousy of the most mean and petty order can alone have prompted the bitter hate that when the statue fell blazed up from beneath its feet. I am speaking, of course, of those who had known him, who had pretended friendship for him, and to whom his aberration had been no secret.

In considering him, even in his most prosperous days, mediocrity could console

itself with the thought that had he chosen to exert himself, there was, for a man of his presence, physique, facundity, and brain, nothing in the field of honour and rewards to which he might not have aspired. Yet he satisfied himself with that mere *gloire de salon* of which Balzac speaks; and like Balzac himself, harassed throughout life by debt, he never had the fill of his desires.

"I could have become anything," he said once to me, when we were speaking of his ambition. And he added, "But have I not chosen the better part?"

I know that when I first met him his ambition was a very lofty one. Although he never defined it to me, he once described its amplitude. We were speaking of a whilom friend of his who had thought fit to turn upon him, because he feared that the ridicule which Oscar Wilde's extravagances in the sunflower days excited amongst those who did not understand his

motives, might extend to him as his friend, and injure his prospects in life with a statesman who was his patron.

"What he says," said Oscar Wilde, referring to the letter in which his friend closed their relationship, "is like a poor little linnet's cry by the roadside, along which my immeasurable ambition is sweeping forward."

I used to feel that he would achieve wonderful things; and when I felt world-weary and tired of life, would say to myself that life was worth waiting out, if only to see him realise his splendid destiny. Well might unexplainable laughter shake my frame at the moment when I saw him first!

The man who was afterwards branded as a corrupter of youth exerted on me, as a young man, an influence altogether beneficial. If he had taught me nothing but the great value and happiness of life,

I should still owe him an unpayable debt, for my disposition tended to that *tædium vitæ* which makes existence pure misery. In which connection I recall, that telling him that the idea of suicide often haunted me, he answered "Suicide is the greatest compliment that one can pay to society," a suggestion which should stir even the most despondent individualism into resistance. I repeated his own words to him at a time when he spoke to me of suicide as the only possible issue from a terrible fate impending, but I am certain that he never needed any stimulus to courage.

The example of his purity of life in such a city as Paris, of his absolute decency of language, of his conversation, in which never an improper suggestion intruded, the loftier ideals that he pursued, the elegance and refinement which endowed him, would have compelled even the most perverse and dissolute to some restraint. The companion-

ship of Oscar Wilde, in the days in which I lived in his intimacy, would have made a gentleman, at least outwardly, of a man of bad morals and unclean tongue.

But his friendship did more than this. It taught one what friendship ought to mean, —a friendship which, going beyond the purse, is ready to lay down reputation itself. On more than one occasion had he so sacrificed himself for friends who afterwards turned upon him; and I remember a dramatic story which he told me of how he had saved a famous draughtsman (since dead) from penal servitude, at the risk of the same to himself. He was goodheartedness embodied. His money was his friends' money, he had no heed of it. He would exert himself for a friend in a way which, had the exertion been for himself, would have appalled his idleness. He would find publishers for unknown poets and managers for aspiring playwrights, even when he was called upon to stand the risks

himself. Not a few contemptible faces rise up before me as I write of men who, so helped by him, were the first to deny him.

A week after we had first met he spent a whole day walking and driving about Paris to find a rare little book, Delvau's Life of Gerard de Nerval, which he wished me to read. "Literary men in England," he said, "often talk about Gerard de Nerval, but nobody really knows anything about him. He has become a classic, you see, and classics are what everybody talks about, but nobody reads. With this little book you will be able to write an article which will be welcomed, and which may help your reputation." And though just that day his purse was nearly empty, he paid the high price that was asked for this little book when he found it.

For we interested ourselves in Gerard de Nerval, and the children of sorrow who, like him, trod the path of letters to a very evil

goal—Chatterton, Poe, and Baudelaire; and I do not think that a day passed on which we did not speak, and long, of these unhappy poets. The very horror of their fates seemed to heighten for us the splendour of their genius, to call for our greater admiration and enthusiasm.

We walked about Paris one night trying to trace the tragic footsteps of Gerard de Nerval, that hopeless lover of the Queen of Sheba, on his way to Old Lanthorn Street, where one early morning he was found hanging from the iron railing of an evil house. We were glad when we found the inn—the sign at least, if not the actual house—where this dainty aristocrat in letters used to drink deep with the outcasts of the *halles*. And I felt that Oscar Wilde was sincere in the interest which he professed for a story most pitiful among the many pitiful stories of the accursed race of poets. I think that if our sympathy was so strongly

enlisted, it was because each of us felt a wonder, mixed with fear, whether, like Gerard de Nerval, our sightless souls might not stray to some red hell like his.

And as we walked along, Oscar Wilde repeated the poet's lines :

"Où sont nos amoureuses ?
Elles sont au tombeau.
Dans un sejour plus beau,
Elles sont plus heureuses.
Elles sont près des anges,
Au fond du ciel bleu,
Où elles chantent les louanges
De la Mère de Dieu.

The radiant dandy, upon whom people looked back as he passed, was hastening to no coarse festival. It was a poet on a pilgrimage to a ragged poet's place of death, and on his lips was the poet's elegy.

The story of Baudelaire's life enthralled us even as his poetry enchanted. I owe it altogether to Oscar Wilde that I became

familiar with the most wonderful verse which was written in France in the nineteenth century. And though, with ill-masked insincerity, he professed to prefer in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the horrid realisms of *The Carcase*, and *The Murderer's Wine*, he taught me to admire, with some degree of his own enthusiasm, the organ swell of *La Musique*, the stately sweep of the unknown woman in deep mourning, to love also Diana in gallant equipage.

The maladive interest which he showed in Baudelaire's slow self-destruction, on which an end waited far more appalling than Gerard de Nerval's short struggle in the strangling rope, may have proceeded from his inwit of tendencies with him which might lead him to the same end. That at least was spared to him and us.

Yet his imitativeness, one of the marked traits in his character, prompted him at least to dally with the poisons that crushed

Baudelaire into an inert, voiceless, if sentient mass; and as he had borrowed from Balzac his monkish cowl, from Victor Hugo the form of his paper, so from Baudelaire he took absinthe; and if he did not take haschish also, it was because he could procure it nowhere. But here his refinement saved him. It was not in his nature to yield to excess, and having played with poisons, he cast them aside.

I have spoken of the insincerity of his admiration for *La Charogne*. Was he altogether insincere? There was at that time living in Paris the poet Maurice Rollinat, who in those days was laying hands upon his perishable body and his immortal soul much in the same way as Baudelaire did, whose acknowledged pupil in poetry he was. It was drugs, drugs with him morning and night, drugs for food and drugs for sleep; cerebral excitement all the time. The result as we saw it was a terrible one, and we could

fancy the nerve-wreck of Charles Baudelaire before the bow snapped, from the ravaged picture before us. To the possible joy of the angels and to the certain gain of France, this exquisite poet and musician, Maurice Rollinat, went only so far and no further. He checked himself ere it was too late, and fled to the remotest countryside, and flung himself, a shattered and diseased man, at the feet of Nature, our kindly mother, that she might help him to undo what poison had done. And Nature was good to him, for after some years of silence we could rejoice in the resurrection of the lost soul. Paris resounded with the echoes of his muse.

The joy that Oscar Wilde took in the ravaged personality of the poet, who at that time seemed to be tottering, like a man on a tight-rope, between lunacy on one side and death on the other, seemed to me sincere, and mingled with admiration rather than pity. He invited him to dinner at the

OSCAR WILDE WHEN AT OXFORD, 1878.

(J. Guggenheim, Photor, Oxford.)

To face p. 48.

Hotel Voltaire, and entertained him royally, and after dinner prayed of him to recite certain of his verses. Rollinat gave us his terrible Ballad of Troppmann, a gruesome and terrifying poem, to which the nervous excitement of its author, as he repeated it with wild gestures, lent additional horror. It was a very revel of the morbid. Poe would have crossed the ocean to be present. Oscar Wilde expressed a supreme satisfaction.

On me, that evening produced a feeling of deep melancholy. I passed a sleepless night, and I wondered whether my friend had not felt, in Rollinat's presence and at the aspect of his state, a prompting to say a word, to hold out a hand, to offer help. From a man of his presence, with the authority of his reputation and position, an attempt at interference would not have been resented, and might have helped. His silence, nay, his approval, before a spectacle of self-destruction which to my Calvinistic conscience seemed the

sin which can never be pardoned, were in my mind when, next day, as we were crossing the Pont des Arts, I asked him :

"If you saw a man throw himself into the river here, would you go after him?"

"I should consider it an act of gross impertinence to do so," he said. "His suicide would be a perfectly thought-out act, the definite result of a scientific process, with which I should have no right whatever to interfere."

V

THERE was no selfishness in this assumed indifference. Oscar Wilde was at once a supreme egotist and the least selfish of men,—that is to say, that he combined complete individualism with a large and generous altruism. He had not the masked selfishness of self-sacrifice where his strong nature rebelled against the victimization of himself.

He could not go against his nature to oblige another. He would not have divided his last shilling with a friend, but, what is infinitely more rare, he was always ready to give away his superfluity. This requires a higher generosity. The benefactor of the popular image after all,

sacrifices a sixpence only. Now, I have known Oscar Wilde, who never invested a penny, give away hundreds of pounds. His comfort had to be assured; and he made no pretence, as some do, of philanthropy which imposed privation on himself. And no one who knew him, who had watched his physical life, could expect it of him, or blame as selfishness what was only egotism. In his intense joy of life, asceticism was impossible to his nature. It was a pleasure to watch his enjoyment at table, his delight in comfortable clothes, the bounding gratitude of all his being for all the good things of existence. I remember the childlike glee with which he once put on a new overcoat. He hugged himself for pleasure in its comfortable folds and said, "So nice and warm." It seemed absolutely the right of this nature to have all it wanted, and it was a real satisfaction to see its enjoyment of the sensualities of

life, — a spectacle which was a most refreshing relief in these days of sham Puritans and the bogus self-denials of the sorriest Tartuffes. His faults of sensuality, if they may so be styled, were open and undisguised. You might watch them as you might have watched a King of France at Versailles, for he feasted in public.

But there was nothing coarse or gross in his sensualism. He was a man of too much refinement to overstep the line. I never once saw him drink to excess; and that he always held a whiphand over his habits was shown to me by the ease with which he adapted himself to the prison regulations. On hearing of his arrest, I had fancied that the privation of tobacco would be torture to him, for he was an incessant smoker of cigarettes. He used to order these by the thousand, and I have seen him in Tite Street carrying with him, as he moved from one room to

another, a box of cigarettes of the size of a large biscuit-tin. I remembered that once in Charles Street, where I was living in the same house as he, my cigarettes having given out in the night, I was driven to get up and go to the sitting-room where we had spent the evening, to grope in the fender and fireplace for any cigarette ends which we had thrown away. Whilst I was so engaged, the door opened stealthily, and Oscar Wilde came in, with a look of much concern on his face. He had, he confessed, come on the same errand as myself.

Accordingly, I imagined he must be suffering badly in Holloway Gaol, and out of sympathy, laid the penance of abstinence from tobacco for as long on myself also. When I met him after his release on bail, I asked him if the privation had tortured him as much as many prisoners of whom one has heard, and he

said, "No. You make up your mind that you cannot smoke, and you resign yourself to the inevitable with ease." He was not the helpless slave to his passions that he has been represented to be.

He had the sheer horror of physical ugliness, and avoided the society of those who appeared to him ill-favoured. This explains a fatal answer he made in cross-examination during Lord Queensberry's trial, an answer on which the worst construction was put. This repulsion was an idiosyncrasy—a part and parcel of his artistic temperament. It has been observed, without arousing comment, in other prominent men.

I have heard him refuse to meet people who were ugly, however sympathetic to him, because of the real distress which their appearance caused to him. I have heard him excuse himself on such occasions in accents which left no doubt of his

sincerity. "I cannot do it—I really cannot."

So it was, that high as was his admiration for Paul Verlaine, his first conversation with him was the last also. The two poets met at the Café François Premier, where Verlaine used to go for absinthe, and the distressful impression which poor Lelian, of the satyr's face, produced upon Oscar Wilde, was such that he could not bear to meet him again. "It was too dreadful," he said to me. Poor Lelian, by the way, carried off from this interview no other impression than that the English poet had an abundant stock of superior cigarettes, whilst he had to content himself with a penny screw of inferior tobacco. I suppose that all the brilliant things that Wilde said were lost upon the simple Verlaine, that child with the head of a Socrates, whose interests in life were reduced to their most material expression.

He paid no heed to his brother-poet's outpourings of eulogy. His little twinkling eyes leered now at the emptying glass and now at the silver cigarette-case. His visitor, in his enthusiasm, forgot for once his natural hospitality.

Oscar Wilde made no attempt to hide his antipathy for physical defects.

"Ugliness," he used to say, "I consider a kind of malady, and illness and suffering always inspire me with repulsion. A man with the toothache ought, I know, to have my sympathy, for it is a terrible pain. Well, he fills me with nothing but aversion. He is tedious. He is a bore. I cannot stand him. I cannot look at him. I must get away from him."

I once tried to enlist his sympathies on behalf of a poor old Englishman whom I had found starving in Paris, and whom I had befriended for years. I took him round to the hotel at which Oscar Wilde

was staying, but after a minute's conversation Wilde pretended a sudden indisposition, and hurried out of the room.

"How could you bring that man here," he said afterwards, "with such a dreadful complaint?" (my poor friend had some chronic skin disfigurement). "I could not bear the sight of him. It made me ill." And though nothing would induce him to meet my friend again, he did much to alleviate his position.

I was surprised, after what he had told me about his aversion to the ill-favoured, that he should wish for my society.

"Oh, you are wonderful, Robert," he said. "It is the head of a Roman emperor of the decadence—the head of an emperor who reigned but for one day—a head found stamped upon a base coin."

He had addressed me almost from the first by my Christian name, and had desired me to do the same towards him.

I confess I had some difficulty at first in doing so, and this in spite of the fact that I had lived much abroad, and notably in Southern Italy, where friends invariably use this form of address.

"You mustn't call me Wilde," he said. "If I am your friend, my name to you is Oscar. If we are only strangers, I am Mr. Wilde."

My Anglo-Saxon reserve, however, revolted against this Celtic expansiveness, and it was some time before I could acquiesce in such familiarity. It was, I know, all innocence and warmness of heart on his side towards his friends, and this also I offered to say in Court when this habit of his friendship was raised up, in its turn, into a charge against him.

Although he never said ill things of the absent, he had an openness of expression towards his friends which never disguised anything that displeased him. Much of the

fierce hatred that blazed up round him when he fell, was fed no doubt by rancorous remembrances of lessons in manners and taste, unhesitatingly delivered, and at the time accepted with sycophantic silence and submission. Yet he never spoke ill of people, even of bitter enemies, who were not present to hear him. I cannot recall any more biting remark from his lips than a humorous answer he made to me on the second day of our friendship. Referring to one of the guests who had been present at the dinner-party, I mentioned that he was the son of a famous lady-pianiste.

"Well," said Oscar Wilde, "I am glad to see that he has managed to survive it."

With regard to his enemies, he had a serenity, a tolerance in speaking of them that alone would have sufficed to rank him in my mind amongst natures of election. During his career he was often attacked and ridiculed, but I never heard him speak of

those who had sought to cause him pain except in condonation. He never had one bitter word for the many friends who betrayed him. This admirable quality reached to heroism in his tragic days. In the abyss into which he was plunged, never once did a word of recrimination pass his lips. He sought to devolve on no one any fragment of his responsibility, he blamed no one for the horror of his fate, he essayed in nowise to lessen the crushing fardel of his infamy, by shifting on to other shoulders any portion of its burden.

But if one said or did anything in his presence that displeased his sense of *bienséance*, he was not slow to reprove it. Such reproofs were delivered with so much dignity and mansuetude, that I cannot fancy natures base enough to have harboured rancour, having accepted them at the time. But circumstances exposed many such pitiful minds.

I myself was once or twice called to order by him, and I have no feeling in this connection but one of gratitude for the lesson. Like many young men who, while ambitious, are of insecure position, I sought assurance in boasting. "Anything approaching self-aggrandisation," he said to me on more than one occasion, "is vulgar. You must avoid it."

He never relinquished what he must have considered the prerogative of his superior nature; and in the days after his fall, when some might fancy he would have been desirous to conciliate people, he was as intolerant as ever towards laches of conduct in his presence. I remember how at Berneval, shortly after his release from prison, he lectured, in my presence, a very wealthy Irish poet, who had been brought to his house by a publisher, on certain points of good breeding, which he had seemed to ignore.

VI

HAD his influence indeed been for evil, it was to certain destruction that that meeting in the house of the Avenue de Ségur would have doomed me, for I surrendered to it entirely. The delight that I took in this friendship proceeded as much from my nature as from the circumstances under which I was living when we first met. I had laid a severe discipline on myself and had been living in almost absolute solitude in a cottage, surrounded by high walls, in a remote part of Passy. Here I wrote, with no companionship but that of my many dogs, and with no visitors but one strange old woman, a Marquise, who had been famous for her beauty during the Second Empire, who professed great admira-

tion for some poor verse of mine, and tried to prove it by coming to render menial services in the poet's neglected house. In her old imperial days a royal admirer had compared her to the girl in "La Cruche Cassée" of Greuze, and indeed she resembled her. Clesinger had hewn her bust in marble. Yet she delighted to cook for me and to sweep my house, and I found her once darning my hose.

To be taken out of this hermit's existence into the gladdest society was to me like a draught of strong wine. I let myself drift on the whirling current of this new life, but never once did anxiety beset me as to whither it might bear me. I felt that his friendship was all for good; and disastrous as in wounded sympathy it proved to be, nothing ever came, from first to last, to belie that feeling.

Except on the occasions when he was invited out, the whole of our waking hours during those days in Paris were spent together

I used to call at the Hotel Voltaire at noon, and rarely returned to Passy before three o'clock in the morning. He would not come out to the wilds of my retreat after one visit.

"Passy," he said, "is a dreadful place to get to. It is so far off that one's cabman keeps getting down off his box to ask for something on account of his *pourboire*."

I think it was rather my dogs who frightened him away. He had a curious dislike to animals. "Dogs are so fussy," he said, "that they become tedious." This *badinage* concealed a real physical aversion, which I afterwards found in Alphonse Daudet also.

On the one occasion when he came to my house, he lunched with me. The poor Marquise had prepared the dinner, and for the most part waited on us. But she found no favour in his eyes in spite of her kindness, and that evening he rated me for associating with a person whom old age had so disfigured.

We often went to Lavenue's, near the Gare Montparnasse, a house of call in those days for artists of the brush and of the pen. Paul Bourget used to be there, and one day John Sargent sketched the three of us into the wonderful album which was one of the curiosities of the house. A year or two ago, happening that way, I entered this café, and asked for the book, hoping to revive for a few moments the radiant past. But the landlord of those days was landlord no longer. He had retired, and had taken his albums with him.

The Café d'Orsay, on the Quai d'Orsay, often attracted us on our way to the Hôtel Voltaire, and here we also used to meet Bourget. He was then in penurious days, and seemed as depressed and reticent as Wilde was exuberant and talkative. I think at times of these two as they then were in the race, and as they were twelve years later, Bourget in the palm-embroidered coat of the Academy, Wilde in the . . .

I was then living too much out of the world, to be able to say what impression he produced in Parisian society, or what successes he achieved. I fancy, though, that these were less than at the time I imagined, and as was reported in London. He seems to have attracted the attention of de Goncourt, who refers to the English poet in his diary, and quotes some of the stories he told of his experiences in America. I have described his visits to Victor Hugo and to de Nitis. I also accompanied him on two occasions to Sarah Bernhardt, who showed great liking and admiration for him. On the first occasion we called on her at the Vaudeville Theatre, during the performance of one of Sardou's plays, in which she was acting. We were received in the little salon adjoining her dressing-room; and Sarah, who was in evident déshabille, changing dresses for her part, put her head out between the dividing curtains to welcome Oscar Wilde with her

most cordial smiles. Jean Richepin and other men were in the little drawing-room—the author of *Les Blasphèmes* with his arms folded—and it seemed to me that our visit, no less than Sarah's evident pleasure in it, was somewhat resented.

Some days later we went to her house on the Avenue de Villiers, and on the way Oscar Wilde purchased from a street hawker a large heap of wallflowers, which he presented to her. It was a poor offering, but she seemed delighted with it. We found Alexandre Parodi in her studio, who showed much deference to Oscar Wilde, and called him "cher maître." Parodi was the author of that tragedy *Rome Vaincue*, in which Sarah secured her first real stage-triumph at the Comédie Française. I was much gratified by his attitude towards my new friend, for I knew Parodi's own worth; but Oscar Wilde found him rather tedious, and the fact was that Parodi, who had fallen on evil

days, was very depressing in his conversation.

Wilde appeared to be sought after by English people who were visiting Paris, but he did not very willingly accept their invitations. There was an amusing person staying at the Hôtel du Rhin—I believe she was a woman of great wealth—with whom he dined on several occasions. One night he had appointed me to meet him in the Place Vendôme at ten o'clock, but it was past eleven before he came out of the Hôtel du Rhin, and I complained of the hundreds of times I had had to walk round the square whilst awaiting him. He said, "Good Heavens, do you think I have been enjoying myself?" and gave me a little glimpse of the egotism to which I have referred. He then spoke of his hostess as a woman who had a mania for associating the name of any person she was introducing either with some accomplishment, or, in default, with some incident

connected with him which might arouse interest.

"She introduced a young man to-night as Mr. John ——, whose uncle, poor Sir William, had his legs so shamefully mangled on the underground railway the other day."

The advances which were made to him by distinguished people in Parisian society had been carefully attracted by himself. He was not disdainful of the indispensable arts for fostering social advancement. On his arrival in Paris he had sent copies of his volume of poems, with letters, to various artists and authors. At the time of his arrest I saw in more than one literary salon, laid out as curios of actuality, the volume, with its dedication and its accompanying letter, written twelve years previously. The shrewdness in the management of his affairs which this betokened confirmed me in the opinion that in their final mismanagement he was never for a moment a responsible man,

and this, as will be seen later, was his wife's opinion also.

I have said that our conversation was almost entirely about literature. He talked to me much of Walter Pater and of Swinburne. For these two his admiration was supreme. But he interested me, perhaps, more when he spoke of Carlyle's *History of the French Revolution*, of which he knew many passages by heart, and it was wonderful to hear how beautiful they sounded from his lips. For at that time I was affecting an admiration for the sanguinary scoundrels of the Revolution. I had not then watched the Republic at work, and the answer of Enjolras, "Citoyen, ma mère, c'est la Republique," seemed to me a divine utterance. Also, when Oscar Wilde, writing to me at Passy, used to address his letters to the "Citoyen Robert Sherard," I was as pleased with the envelope as with its contents.

When he talked about himself, it was

literature also. His sayings always seemed witty to me, and I used to note down in an interleaved copy of de la Rochefoucauld the *bons mots* I had heard from him during the day. I think that the saying of which just then he was most proud was where he had expressed his disappointment with the Atlantic to an interviewer in New York. And he related also, with much gusto, how in a country-house he had told his host one evening that he had spent the day in hard literary work, and that, when asked what he had done, he had said, "I was working on the proof of one of my poems all the morning and took out a comma." "And in the afternoon?" "In the afternoon—well, I put it back again." There was also his remark to a hostess who reproved him for coming late. "What, madam, do you think that that little clock knows of what the great golden sun is doing?"

He spoke little of his American tour, and I gathered that it had not been a source of much satisfaction to him, and that the ugliness of American cities had distressed him. The only incident which he related with pleasure was that he had discovered in Chicago a young sculptor of Irish extraction, who was poor, friendless, ignored, and unhappy; and that by speaking of him and his work in the course of one of his lectures in that city, he had drawn attention to him, with the result that his position had been greatly improved. The sculptor afterwards came to Europe, but I did not see him by Wilde's side when the catastrophe had come.

Of colours, magenta, of places, Bayswater, were his horror. At least, so he said. A Bayswater view of life meant, from his lips, a severe condemnation for mediocrity. That staid London district afforded him an attributive of almost universal application. And the same may be said of the word 'chromo-

lithographic.' With reference to the colour magenta, he declared that the sight of it gave him real pain. He was delighted to hear that a bitter enemy of my youth had been a boy whom I knew only as "the Magenta Gad" from a bag he carried, and with whom I had fought many battles. I remember that Oscar Wilde composed a verse "to render the colour impossible." It ran something like this:

"Put yellow lilies in your hair,
But wear not the magenta zone,
For that would make you out of tone,
I could not love you if you were."

I heard little of his school or University days, but when we spoke together of Oxford there was enthusiasm on his side. His years at Magdalen seemed to him at that time to have been the happiest period of his life. I always fancied that the fact that I did not take my degree seemed to him to draw a line between us. There were certain subjects on which he would not listen to me; and when

other graduates were present, a vague feeling of exclusion from his confidence communicated itself to me.

He spoke of his parents with high admiration, but I noticed with some misease that, with reference to his father, he seemed to have the middle-class contempt for the title of knighthood. He would refer to it apologetically, yet for more sonorous prefixes he had a certain admiration. He introduced me at various times to noblemen, and each time I noticed with what pleasure he pronounced their names. These things were the only indications, and those of the very faintest, that he had risen to a place in society which was not his *milieu* by birth.

For Speranza he had a sheer veneration, and the beauty of his conduct towards her to the very end, must arrest admiration and respect from those who most severely condemn him. In all the bitterness of his punishment, nothing can have pained his

noble heart more than that he could not be with her when she died. In France, a condemned murderer, his mother lying at death's door, would be allowed, under escort certainly, to go to her bedside, but in England the prison regulations are framed with no such humanity. During the whole day of February 3rd, 1896, I had the spectacle before my eyes of the unhappy man in his cell in Reading Gaol, knowing that each moment might be his mother's last.

He spoke of her to me often in those radiant early days, and with such enthusiasm that for it alone I could not but have admired him. Her serenity towards life was one of the points he insisted upon with most pride, and there was a tragic story he used to tell of how, when his mother was nursing his father on his dying bed, each morning there came into the sick-room the veiled and silent figure of a woman who sat and watched but never spoke, and at nightfall went away, to

return next morning. Her serenity was to stand Lady Wilde in good stead in the last days; her resignation spared her much bitter suffering. When the final verdict was communicated to her, and she knew that she would see him no more, she only turned over on her side in bed and said, "May it help him!"

He was a good son. When he was in London, he never let a day pass without visiting his mother. In spite of his extravagance and generosity to his friends, and the precariousness of his income, he contributed to her support largely and with a regularity most meticulous. Nor did he limit himself to this allowance. On arriving at the house, his first steps used to carry him to the rack by the side of the fireplace where unpaid bills were put, and if he ever went away without leaving the money to discharge them, it was because he had bestowed it elsewhere. And though he might not follow his mother to her grave, he had at least in

his prison-cell the consolation of the thought that her sumptuous and honourable funeral was paid for out of the poor remnant of his fallen fortune.

He spoke to me also with much affection and admiration of his brother Willy, and told me stories of their boyish comradeship which showed a warm heart here also. And though in later years the ways of the two brothers deviated, and a gulf seemed to divide them, he maintained his admiration for Willy's brilliant cleverness to the end, and in the bottom of his heart the old boyish affection also. I heard him once after Willy's death scourge a man who had spoken somewhat slightingly of his brother, as I had never heard him speak before.

His ingenuousness, his simplicity, showed themselves in his story of an incident of their nursery days. "I had given Willy a toy bear of mine, of which I was very fond," he said, "and whenever afterwards I got angry

with him, I used to threaten him with an 'I shall take back my bear, Willy.' It was a saying with us till we were men." He laughed heartily at this remembrance.

When he spoke, as he often did, of the sister who was dead, his wondrous eyes softened. "She was like a golden ray of sunshine dancing about our home." It was she of whom he wrote in his poems :

"Coffin-board, heavy stone,
Lie on her breast.
I vex my heart alone,
She is at rest."

The beautiful child "who hardly knew

She was a woman,
So softly she grew"

Yes, under the posturing and the persiflage, under the scented curls and the cynicism, under the native sensuality and the assumed worldliness, there was in my friend the tender heart of an affectionate little child. Nor did adversity any more harden it than triumph.

It was so to the last as it had always been.

All these are the impressions which my memory recalls, as I think back on the days in which the friendship dawned. When I left Paris, he remaining behind, I railed against the circumstances which were separating us.

VII

THE regret for this separation followed me to London, and grew so strong that on my arrival there I determined to abandon a project, which, if I had carried it out, would have taken me for years to the East, and perforce have interrupted a communionship which had invested life for me with a new and warm interest.

I wrote to him to tell him so, for he had long tried to dissuade me from leaving Europe, where, he said, I could find my true career.

He shortly afterwards came to London, and hearing that I had gone to meet the spring in Westmoreland, he telegraphed to me at the cottage where I was living to ask me if I could receive him there. I told him

in my answer of the narrow things at home, and warned him that for all the daffodils and violets of my hillside he would find the rough North living intolerable. In the end he decided not to come, but we maintained an active correspondence.

His letters were a constant delight to me, and I found them so beautiful that, as I remember, making my will at that time, I bequeathed my collection of them to the woman I reverence most of all women in the world. I will add this, that when that lady heard that I was writing this story of my friendship, she wrote to ask me if I had preserved those beautiful letters which my friend had written to me in those days.

I mention this because, in letters of his, similar in tone and style, evil was found, so true is it that any man can be hanged on two lines of his writing. I give one of these letters, written to me in Ambleside, after I had known him for about three months.

"DEAR ROBERT,—Your letters are charming, they are iridescent, and everything you see or hear seems to become touched with colour and tinged with joy. I think of you often wandering in violet valleys with your honey-coloured hair, and meditating on the influence of paradoxes on the pastoral mind; but you should be here. One can only write in cities, the country hanging on one's walls in the grey mists of Corot, or the opal mornings that Daubigny has given us: not that I have written here—the splendid whirl and swirl of life in London sweeps me from my Sphynx. I am hard at work being idle; late midnights and famishing morrows follow one another. I wish I was back in Paris, where I did such good work. However, society must be amazed, and my Neronian coiffure has amazed it. Nobody recognises me, and everybody tells me I look young: that is delightful, of course.

"My book you will have next week—it is

a great pleasure to give it to anyone so sympathetic as you—poet to poet. I give you my work because your joy in it makes it more dear to me.

"Who is your young man who likes what I said of the primrose?

"My pen is horrid, my ink bad, my temper worse.— Write soon, and come soon to London. "OSCAR."

If the extravagance of his address had evoked from me anything but a smile, I might have gone as far as to cry out, "*Quel blagueur!*" I cannot conceive how even the most perverted mind could find wrong in such letters. I was willing, and offered, to bring these early letters of his into Court, to show that long before suspicion attainted him, at a time when his sanity could not be called in question, he used the imagery of his pen to beautify his letters to all his friends, seeking similes to flatter and please them.

I do not know what the book was to which the letter refers, but I think it must have been the *Duchess of Padua*, which he had finished some time before I left Paris. Indeed, I was with him at the Hotel Voltaire on the day when he heard from Mary Anderson, to whom he had sent a copy of the drama which was written for her. He telegraphed in the morning for her decision, and whilst we were talking together after lunch her answer came. It was unfavourable; yet, though he had founded great hopes on the production of this play, he gave no sign of his disappointment. I can remember his tearing a little piece off the blue telegraph-form and rolling it up into a pellet and putting it into his mouth, as, by a curious habit, he did with every paper or book that came into his hands. And all he said, as he passed the telegram over to me, was, "This, Robert, is rather tedious."

We met again, a month or two later, by hazard in a train in London, and he asked me to come and stay in Charles Street, where he was living in rooms. The street has since been transformed, and now goes by the name of Carlos Street. The house, which was opposite the mews of the Coburg Hotel, has been pulled down. It was an old house, and the rooms on the third floor which Oscar Wilde occupied were panelled in oak, and there were old engravings in heavy black frames on the wall.

The house was kept by a retired butler and his wife, who was a very good cook, and the service was luxurious. I was accommodated with a bedroom on the ground floor, and shared Wilde's sitting-room upstairs. It was a pleasant life, and our breakfasts were after the fashion of Oxford. We often invited guests to this first meal, and over Parascho cigarettes and fine liqueurs discoursed till long after noon. During the

first days of my stay there Oscar Wilde took me to a reception at his mother's house. Lady Wilde was living at that time in Park Street, Grosvenor Square, in a charming little house which belonged to Willy Wilde. I was presented as having a volume of poems in the press, and was graciously received. Later on, as I was standing talking to Anne Kingsford, Lady Wilde, holding some primroses in her hand, crossed the drawing-room, repeating, "Flowers for the poet! Flowers for the poet!" It was for me that they were intended, for she came up to me and decorated my coat with her posy.

It was a curious existence, this life in Charles Street, Grosvenor Square, not without humour. The fact was that, in despite of an address which implied opulence, we were both very poor. Oscar's American lectures had not been productive, and the *Duchess of Padua* had realised nothing. My friend accordingly was obliged, much against his will,

to accept an engagement from an agency to lecture in the provinces. It was a real penance to him, and I could understand this after I had seen how his lectures were advertised in the provincial papers. But his money needs were pressing, and perforce he had to lend himself to this exploitation of the notoriety gained in the period which he had renounced.

I remained on in Charles Street and continued to write. I do not suppose that there was a poorer man in London than myself; and whenever chance now takes me to Grosvenor Square, I recall how for hours I used to walk round it in those days, trying to forget my hunger under the suspicious eyes of powdered footmen. Still I had hope, for I had just published a novel in three volumes, and a book of poems was in the press.

Oscar Wilde returned to town at intervals, and on more than one occasion pulled out of

the pocket of his fur coat a handful of notes and gold which he had earned so distastefully in the provinces, and told me to take what I needed. "It's as much yours as mine," he said. "You know I have no sense of property."

On these occasions of his return to town we used to dine at the Café Royal, and very often Whistler was a *convive.* We used to drink *Château des Mille-Sécousses,* a claret Whistler had discovered. We were blind to the omen of its name. And though Wilde seemed to be the arbiter at these dinners, his deference towards Whistler was very marked. He seemed to take pleasure in paying him compliments. I remember his once referring to something Whistler had done or was to do, with the expression "like the fine old-Virginian gentleman that you are." I witnessed also the exchange of much correspondence between them, repartee by letter or telegram, in which Whistler's

sayings seemed to delight my friend. I was with him, by the way, also, when the two quarrelled, but I never heard Wilde say one word, either then or later, in resentment.

During my hungry afternoons, when my friend was away, I often used to look out of the third-floor window to watch the carriages of the opulent householders of Mayfair returning from Oxford Street. There was usually a pile of volumes by my lady's side, and I watched and watched if I might recognise the covers of my *opus primus.* I watched in vain, and the truth forced itself upon me at last, in spite of my friend's encouragements, that I could not live by the production of belles-lettres in Grosvenor Square.

So, as there is no city in the world where one can starve with less discomfort than Paris, I determined to return there, to exchange my panelled sitting-room for a *chambre garnie,* and the Parascho cigarettes for *caporal ordinaire.*

VIII

It was some time during my stay in Charles Street that Oscar Wilde told me that he was engaged to be married. He had arrived in town early one morning from Dublin, and he woke me in bed and gave me the news. I said, "I am very sorry to hear it," and turned over to resume my slumbers. He said, "What a brute you are, Robert," and that was the end of the conversation then. I know that I felt he was not likely to be happy in domestic life, and still less to make a woman happy.

At breakfast he spoke of his bride, and seemed much in love, and very joyous.

The *parti* seemed a good one, for his wife's dowry would assure a regular and

substantial income. But I misdoubted the future, for I could not fancy him in the part of a householder and man of family. I did not then know the gentle lady whom he had elected.

I was living in Paris at the time of his wedding, but as they crossed to France the same day, I was introduced on the morrow to Mrs. Wilde. They were staying in some very pleasant rooms on one of the higher stories of the Hôtel de Wagram, in the Rue de Rivoli, and a beautiful pair they made. The lovely young wife seemed supremely happy. There was bright sunlight, as one only sees it in Paris, on the Tuileries without, yet the room where I first met her was just as gladsome. It was full of flowers and youth and laughter. I felt that my morose forebodings at the time that I first heard of the engagement were more than stultified; and as we walked out together, Oscar Wilde told me that marriage was indeed wonderful.

OSCAR WILDE, FROM A DRAWING, 1882.

To face p. 92.

We were passing through the Marché St. Honoré at the time, and here he stopped and rifled a flower-stall of its loveliest blossoms, and sent them, with a word of love on his card, to the bride whom he had quitted but a moment before.

We all lunched together, and after dinner we drove out in an open fiacre. As we were turning into the Place de la Concorde, I said, "Would you mind, Oscar, if I threw my stick away?"

He said, "No, don't. People would see you, and it would cause a scene. Why do you want to throw it away?"

I said, "It's a swordstick; and I don't know how it is, but for the last minute I have had a wild desire to pull out the blade and run it through you. I think it's because you look too happy. Or it may be that it would be such a horrible thing to do to you on the day after your wedding."

"No, no," he said, "don't throw it away.

Don't make a scene." Mrs. Wilde laughed and took the stick from my hand. "I shall keep this," she said; and the common little cane was for a long time, I know, one of her curiosities. In a letter which she wrote to me many years afterwards she added in a postscript, "I have still got the swordstick."

I do not know if a passing madness had really put my friend in danger in one of the happiest moments of his life, but I have sometimes thought since that here was a premonition — in what mysterious manner suggested, I cannot say.

I think that it was during his stay in Paris at this time that he visited with me the haunts of the lowest criminals and poorest outcasts of the city, the show-places of the Paris Inferno,—Père Lunette's and the Château-Rouge, — which everybody who wishes to know the depths of darkness which exist in the City of Light goes to see.

There were several of us. I fancy the American, Stuart Merrill, a French poet highly esteemed, was one of the party. Oscar Wilde had expressed himself delighted at the prospect of the excursion, for he said, "The criminal classes have always had a wonderful attraction for me"; to which feeling, by the way, he gave such effective expression in that masterly essay, "Pen, Pencil, and Poison," and other papers.

He was dressed that night with his accustomed elegance, and had some trinkets on his person; and knowing the habits of the customers of these houses, I once or twice interposed myself between him and some particularly notorious character, whose intentions were only too apparent to me. Referring to which afterwards, when speaking of his round of the *bas-fonds* of Paris, he used to say, "Robert was splendid, and defended me at the risk of his life."

I have one scene of the many that that

evening brought forth, always before my eyes. At the tavern of the Château-Rouge there is a large room upstairs, or was at that time, where, by paying a halfpenny to the landlord, homeless vagabonds and beggars could sleep on the floor till closing-time at two o'clock in the morning. This room was known as the *Morgue*, or the *Salle des Morts*, and was the favourite spectacle of those seeking unhealthy emotions. We had spent some minutes in the pestilential taprooms downstairs, talking to thieves and the saddest daughters of joy, listening to the obscene songs of a frightful old, noseless hag, and watching a number of professional beggars in their display of the tricks by which they feigned infirmities. As a *bonne-bouche*, the *Salle des Morts* was proposed by the Herculean landlord. Wilde agreed, and we went upstairs, the landlord leading the way with a flickering dip.

Stretched out in every posture of pain

and discomfort, many in the stupor of drink, many displaying foul sores, maimed limbs, or the stigmata of disease, all in filthy and malodorous rags, the sleepers of the Room of the Dead, with their white faces, immobile and sightless, showed indeed like corpses. I can see my friend's face still, his head just rising above the floor, for his feet had refused to carry him to the top of the staircase into the pestilential room. Seen under the flicker of the bully's dip, there was upon its features the horror of one who looks on the Medusa: a twinge of pity about the lips perhaps, but in the main, horror—sheer horror.

Yet not one of the poor wretches who lay there stunned by the merciful sleep of exhaustion, whose most evil fate, compared to his, was not one to be envied!

IX

His marriage did not at first improve his circumstances, so that he could devote himself entirely to belles-lettres. It became necessary for him to earn a regular income. Mrs. Wilde's fortune was in the bulk to come to her only after the death of her grandfather, who, in *articulo mortis* at the time of Oscar's engagement, "blossomed out into fresh life," as he told me, "after he had joined our hands and given us his parting blessing."

With the pathetic striving that was always part of his character, to subject his wayward nature to discipline, he joyfully accepted the duties of his new position; and the editorship of a ladies' magazine being

offered him, accepted the distasteful employment. His post obliged him to bureau activities. He was forced to come to the City at regular hours on certain days of the week, and I remember meeting him at times in the Strand, brisk on his way to his office, a Pegasus in the plough.

It was one of the rules in the huge literary factory in which he was employed that no smoking was allowed anywhere on the premises, and that, in spite of this restriction, he had accepted the engagement, was a proof to those who knew him how earnestly he felt his responsibility in his new state. When he referred to his bureau life, he used to speak of the great pleasure that he took in the society and conversation of a brother-editor who occupied a high post in the literary factory, and whom he described as a man of great scholarship and high refinement.

It seemed to me also that he enjoyed, too,

in some measure the dignity of editorial authority; and I remember that once in my rooms in Cecil Street, when we were speaking about the remuneration of contributors, he said, "I pay a guinea a page, whether the page is illustrated or not." There was some pride in his tone, and he seemed to have his employers' interests at heart. I recall that conversation all the better because, a little earlier, he had given me a proof that his nature really did suffer amid ugly surroundings,— a proof that his professed cultus of the beautiful proceeded from an innate feeling. I had not been able to receive him the moment he called, and he had been prayed to wait in the room below —in the awful room which in that London lodging-house gave its designation to the drawing-room floor. He had not been more than three minutes sequestrated in the crimson and ormolu horrors of that apartment, with its ugly hangings, bad pictures,

and worse ornaments, before I heard his voice calling plaintively from the landing below, "Do let me come up, Robert," he said, "or I shall have to ask to be allowed to sit on the steps. If I stay a moment longer in that drawing-room, I shall become very ill."

He was living then in his beautiful house in Tite Street, which was to be his last home. It was a very temple of lettered ease, exquisitely decorated and appointed with solid comfort. A study had been fitted up for him at the top of the house, but I do not believe that he ever wrote a line there, and what writing he did do in Tite Street, was done on Carlyle's writing-table, in the little room on the right of the entrance-passage. It was in reference to his idleness, in spite of all the inducements that his abode held out to industry, that he said to me those words of self-reproach which I have quoted: "I am not doing what I ought to do; I ought

to be putting black upon white—black upon white."

This was the period in his life when those who had envied the splendid notoriety of his youth, and had been dismayed by the rapidity and extent of his social success, consoled themselves with the thought that his talents had given the full of their measure, and that his fortune was on its ebb. Indeed, but for his occasional contributions to the reviews, his name was but little heard of during these first years of his married life. The editorial engagement had lapsed and had not been renewed, for Pegasus never suited ploughman yet. I did not know it then, but I heard of it afterwards, that there was in those days often real distress in the beautiful home in Tite Street. If there was, it was never apparent; the marriage seemed happy and prosperous on the many occasions when, visiting London from Paris, I called at the house. His friendliness was

so steadfast towards me, that if my first visit on arriving in town was not to him, he used to write me a letter of reproach. One day, happening to meet me, he asked me why I had been so long in coming to Tite Street. "I came over to be married," I said.

"Oh, I see," he answered. "Now I understand why you have not been to see me."

His attitude and bearing towards his wife were at all times most courteous and deferential, and he affected a humorous solicitude to observe his social duties as her husband. "*C'est le jour de ma femme*," he used to say, in the words of poor Risler ainé, in refusing an invitation on the days when his wife received. I was once or twice present at these receptions, and admired the pains he took to entertain her visitors, although I knew how terribly bored he was under his genial exterior. On one of these afternoons the baby was brought in to be admired by a noble dame, and I remember

that he said something to me, as he touched his little son's cheek with his fat finger, that had a ring of sadness in it—words of foreboding that the child's destiny would not be a happy one—words of commiseration for the sleeping innocent.

An act of his which about this time brought his name again before the public, and which evoked some malevolent comment in the papers, was an act of pure kindness, prompted, I think, by his friendship for me. My poor friend, John Barlas, a poet, who had been my comrade at New, had fallen into the hands of the police. His brain having given way under the stress of misery, and excited by reading Anarchist literature, he had rushed out one morning from the awful kennel in which he was living in the Lambeth Road, and making his way to Westminster Bridge, had fired off a revolver at the House of Commons, "to mark," as he explained at the police-station,

"my contempt for the institution of Parliament." He was remanded for inquiries, and under the circumstances the prospect was a bad one. I heard of his arrest in Paris, and being unable to come over to bestir myself on his behalf, I wrote a long letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, headed "John Barlas, Poet," in which I told all the good things I knew of the poor fellow, and gently suggested that a few doses of bromide of potassium would be the best prescription that the honourable magistrate could ordain. Then Oscar Wilde came forward and offered himself as surety for the poet's future good behaviour; and in the end, John Barlas was bound over to keep the peace for a period of six months, under a penalty of £50, on Wilde's recognisance. It was a generous act on Oscar Wilde's part, for poor Barlas's nervous state was such that there was every probability that he might be called on to

forfeit a sum which at that time he could very ill have afforded to lose. He was much pleased by the deference shown to him in Court. He was invited to sit next to the magistrate. But what I most often think of when I recall his account of that incident is his description of the atmosphere of the regions below the police-court—the region of the cells. The cordiality between the constables and the prisoners, the pervading joviality, the large spirit of tolerance, of comprehension of human weakness, which seemed to actuate gaolers and policemen, surprised and delighted him. I told him that the explanation was that policemen and prisoners are men of the people together, as distinct from the bourgeoisie represented by the magistrate and his text-books, and that when an unfortunate man of the upper classes fell into those depths, he might look in vain for that cordiality and generous tolerance. Oscar Wilde said

that I was an abominable cynic, but I know that in the event he found that I was in the right. There was so little humanity shown to him, that on the night of his arrest the reporters calling at Bow Street police-station were admitted to look into his cell and to feast their eyes on the spectacle of his agony.

X

In the first month of 1891 I saw much of him in London. I had returned, under different circumstances, to my old rooms in Charles Street, and he used to come, to lend the glamour of his presence and of his conversation, to the gatherings of poets who used to spend the evenings with me. I remember that on one occasion John Barlas came, accompanied by an extraordinary young female, who, to show the ardour of her Anarchist convictions, was dressed in red. Oscar Wilde was civil to her, but Barlas seemed to think that he did not show sufficient deference to the comrade; and as we were walking through Berkeley Square, he indignantly separated from us.

He said something to the effect that Wilde ought to have given the lady—the poet's comrade—his arm, which, I admit, would have afforded a strange spectacle. It was a sign of Wilde's urbanity that he showed neither annoyance nor resentment at the poor fellow's extraordinary conduct, yet nobody hated scenes in public more than he did; and again, it was hardly grateful of Barlas, after the way in which, as a stranger, he had befriended him.

During the same year we frequently met in Paris, where he had now begun to be counted, and seriously, amongst European celebrities. In December he was much fêted in the best houses, and leading litterateurs and artists crowded to his hotel. The Princess of Monaco, sending him her portrait at that time, wrote upon it "Au vrai Art—à Oscar Wilde."

I was able then to do something towards imposing him on the attention of Paris,

which gave him great pleasure. I contributed a long article about him and his work to *Le Gaulois*, the leading Conservative and Royalist paper in France. It was printed on the first page, and made him the topic of the day in Paris.*

I had invited him to lunch with me at Paillard's, to meet Coquelin cadet, and as we walked down the boulevard we looked at the people sitting outside the cafés, and when we saw anyone reading the *Gaulois* we both pretended to be very proud.

Coquelin cadet was not greatly impressed by my friend, and I imagine that, as a general rule, Oscar Wilde did not have much success with actors. These may have thought his affectation, harmless as it was, an infringement on their own rights—a trespass on their domain.

A pleasanter dejeûner was one at the Café Riche, to which I invited Jean Moreas

* I have reprinted this article at the end of this book.

and Stephane Mallarmé to meet him. It was very cordial, and I think Oscar Wilde succeeded in amazing the two poets. He had been anxious to meet Mallarmé, and until we saw him come into the room we did not know whether he was coming. The telegram which he had sent me in answer to my invitation, like every piece of prose he wrote, was worded in so intricate and obscure a manner that neither Wilde nor myself had been able to get at its meaning, though we had spent the whole period of the *apéritif* puzzling over it.

A few months later, Oscar Wilde rendered me a service for which I felt very grateful. On the eve of fighting a duel, under severe conditions, I had written to a relation of mine in London about certain arrangements in the event of my mischance. The good fellow, in true friendship to me, was greatly alarmed, and was for informing the police,

so that the duel, with what he deemed "its suicidal conditions," should be stopped. However, before doing so, he went to Tite Street to consult Oscar Wilde, who, I am glad to say, was able to dissuade him from an act which would have put me under *taboo* in Paris for the rest of my days. And after the business was over, I received a letter from Wilde, which was a great comfort to me in a moment of very sore distress. He knew the circumstances, and he wrote to approve of my conduct. I do not think that any of his letters ever gave me so much pleasure.

This was, however, I think, to be the last joy to me of our friendship—in pleasure, at least. I saw little of him during the next three years, which were the years of his splendour and success, for most of the time I was wandering about in the South of France and Spain, and I think that the only time when I visited London was when I accom-

panied Zola there on his conquest of the English. We met once or twice in Paris, but he did not appear to me the same man. I did not think that prosperity had changed him, but the excitement of his success seemed to have intoxicated him, and he was altogether different. Renunciations of him by mutual friends began to occur, distressing me greatly, for I refused, on the strength of my long knowledge of him, to believe the evil rumours which prompted these partings. I know that in 1894, that is to say, a year before the catastrophe, he expressed the most violent anger, in my presence and that of another man, at a letter breaking off acquaintance, which a young French poet had written him. This young man, who since has stepped into the very first rank of French authors, was an intimate friend of mine, and he told me that though he had never seen in Wilde's conduct the slightest thing to justify the rumour that was spread-

ing from London in connection with his name, this rumour was getting such a hold on society in Paris that, for his own dignity, he was obliged to cease a friendship which he should always regret. I remember Wilde's saying, "How I wish that I knew the use of arms, so that I could punish these fellows as they deserve." And I believe to this day that his anger was sincere, not feigned for the circumstance. I felt this quarrel very much, and I had begged my French friend not to countenance a rumour which he disbelieved by deserting Wilde, but he had answered that he was ambitious, and could not compromise himself. His action was prompted in the first place by something that had been said by Leon Daudet, which had been misunderstood. All that Leon Daudet had said was, that he did not like Oscar Wilde's way of dressing. And there is no doubt that what militated from the first against my friend's success in Paris was

his disregard of French taste in this matter. For instance, he was fond of wearing gorgeous fur coats. Now, in Paris, gentlemen never wear fur coats; they are the distinctive garb of dentists and opera-singers, people with whom men of the world in France do not care to associate. He cultivated, to his detriment as far as his social success went, an air of *rastaquouérisme*, which gave the gossips a weapon against him.

I fancy that in his splendour our friendship relaxed. Possibly it was because we so rarely met. There was a feeling on my side of having been cast off, although there was little to warrant it. I can only remember that on one occasion, meeting him as he came out of the Variétés Theatre in company with a very distinguished person, he would not talk a minute, and brusquely departed. I received no letters from him during this period.

It was at Christmas that I met him last,

before the catastrophe of 1895, and my impression was altogether a painful one. He was not the friend I had known and admired for so many years. I dined with him at Tite Street: for once there was no pleasure, but distress rather, in the occasion. He looked bloated. His face seemed to have lost its spiritual beauty, and was oozing with material prosperity. And his conversation also was not agreeable. I concluded that too much good living and too great success had momentarily affected him both morally and physically. There is an American slang-phrase which exactly describes the impression which he produced upon me. He seemed to be suffering from a swollen head! That I could understand. After the stress of years and a long period of heart-gnawing insecurity of position, he had caught the tide of unbounded prosperity. His income then exceeded £8000, and there was every prospect of a future of unrivalled brilliance.

Very few men can maintain their serenity in the intoxication of sudden fortune, eagerly desired, but long delayed. But what grieved me was that he should deem it necessary to let me feel that under the new circumstances there was a distance between us. There was a certain aggressiveness in his tone, and in one remark he actually wounded me. He had been telling me in detail the circumstances under which *The Green Carnation* had been written; how the author of that book, which really raised the hue and cry, had introduced himself to Lord Alfred Douglas in Cairo; how he had won his way into their intimacy, and had collected his materials. He concluded by saying, "Now this, Robert, is not for publication." It was not a nice thing to say, and on his lips it had a peculiar significance, for he always professed the greatest contempt for journalists, and his manner implied that the remark was addressed to me in that capacity. He had

been speaking in the early part of the dinner of his horror for people of that profession, and had mimicked the eagerness of a reporter who, calling at a house where a murder has been committed, begs to be allowed to examine the carpet to see if he can find blood stains.

I know that I felt indignant, and of a mind to leave the house, which I would have done but for the presence of Mrs. Wilde and other guests. And as I walked home that night, I grieved to think that the end was coming of a friendship which had for many years been the joy and the pride of my life.

XI

He afterwards told me how he regretted that during the days that followed upon that last meeting of ours, which had seemed a final parting to both of us, he had not turned to me. "You have authority with me," he said. "I should have listened to you."

And certainly it would have been, I think, in my power to prevent him from that act of folly in laying an information against Lord Queensberry, to which he was incited by the desire of another for private vengeance. It would have sufficed to remind him that in France, whose ethics he so admired that at one time he wished to naturalise himself a Frenchman, gentlemen settle such matters between themselves, and never call in the

police to adjust an offence. I know that he was quite reckless at the time. "I had come to think," he said, "that I could do anything I chose." But he would not have been insensible, had it been pointed out to him, to the ugliness of compassing another's ruin. I should have said to him, "It will be a fine feather in your cap if Lord Queensberry gets the seven years' penal servitude which his enemies wish for him, through your prosecution! You will not know an hour's happiness from the moment of his conviction."

I could have dissuaded him—at least so he told me—and should have tried my best to do so. I admit it would have been a hard task, in view of the evil influence that was at work, and the obvious fact that he had seized on this opportunity to silence the hundred tongues that were wagging against him.

There was a high stake to play for—his

entire rehabilitation; but eagerly as he must have desired this, after the repeated slights to which he had been subjected, I think he could have been brought to see that it would be too dearly purchased at the cost of disgrace and suffering to an unfortunate man, not entirely responsible, to whom life and the world had not been too clement.

But in the whirling excitement of his life at the time, the fiend alcohol beating time, the friend in Paris with his plain-speaking was forgotten, if not purposely discarded. In the blaze of his notoriety as a man long-suffering and long-slandered, who was at last about to crush calumny to the earth, he passed twice through Paris without giving me a sign of his presence.

I followed his movements, with growing wonder and regret, in the papers,—regret, because it was only too easy to gather what a bad impression he created in the rôle of prosecutor. A hotel-keeper at Monte Carlo

had refused to receive him and his companion. I wanted to write to him, but I feared that my letter would be of no effect; that he would resent it, and write to me in such a way that I should be forced to separate myself from him. And I had the intuition that catastrophe was approaching, so that to have quarrelled with him then—having that presentiment—would have appeared to me tantamount to a desertion.

This intuition grew into a certainty after I had read in the papers the account of his cross-examination in the Queensberry trial, and that night I broke the silence of months by sending him a telegram to tell him that should he ever need me he would find me.

I was with an English journalist the following evening when *Le Temps*, the Paris evening-paper, arrived. He looked at the back page, where the latest telegrams are printed, and with a cry of exultation pushed it over to me. It contained the report of the

collapse of the prosecution, the withdrawal of Sir Edward Clarke, and the ominous declarations of Mr. Carson.

The Englishman laughed with pleasure, his harboured spite and envy bubbling from his churning lips. "What do you say of your friendship now?" he asked.

"That it begins," I said.

At that moment my friend with some companions was sitting in a private room in the Cadogan Arms, smoking cigarettes, drinking whisky-and-soda, and waiting. What for waiting, not one of them could have said. They had set fire to a mine, and were trying to stupefy themselves into the belief and hope that it would not explode beneath them. It was reported to me that when, after an intentional delay of many hours, unable to wait any longer, the police at last moved, and a knock came at the door of that sitting-room in the Cadogan Arms, they all blanched as if under the shock of a

sudden surprise. Not one of his friends had had the sense to explain to Wilde what was the true meaning of the warning his counsel had given at the close of his cross-examination, or to force him to realise that, if only as a matter of public policy, he should leave the country at once. As a matter of fact the warrant for his arrest was not signed until after the last day-train for Dover, carefully watched, had been seen to leave without him, and it was impossible to delay action any longer.

When I think back upon the days that followed, a numb pain at my heart reminds me of all that I suffered. The shame, the sorrow, the pity, the horror were all the more hard to bear that I could not find one single soul in all Paris who had any sympathy with me. A shout of exultation rose up around me, as of the demons rejoicing at the irrevocable ruin of a human soul. Those who knew how proud I had been of his friendship

were careful to tax me with it in public places. I never had any prompting to deny it. On the contrary, I maintained it; and until the day of his final conviction, I refused to allow anyone in my presence to charge him with infamy. It was a battle against a big world, but I am glad to think I never flinched, though insulted, traduced, and even assaulted on many occasions.

I wrote to him at once on hearing of his arrest, and endeavoured to console him, and again each succeeding day. I forget what I said, but I know that my letters were of some comfort to him, for in the course of that dreadful week I received from London a letter from one of his friends, from which I take the following extract:

"I saw Oscar yesterday in a private room at the police court, and he gave me your three letters, and asked me to write and tell you how deeply, deeply touched he was by your kindness and sympathy and loyalty to

him in his terrible and undeserved trouble. He himself is so ill and unhappy that he has not sufficient strength and energy to write, and all his time has to be devoted to preparing his defence against a diabolical conspiracy, which seems almost unlimited in its size and strength. I will not add to your sorrow by telling you of the privations and sufferings he has to endure. I have seen him three times since his arrest, once through a horrible kind of barred cage, separated from him by a space of one yard, and in almost complete darkness, with twenty other people talking at the same time. This is the *ordinary* way, and one visit a day of a quarter of an hour is all he is allowed. After that, I managed to get an order from the Home Secretary to see him in a private room for three-quarters of an hour. And yesterday I contrived to have a fairly long interview with him at the police court. In spite of all the brutal and cowardly clamour of our

disgusting newspapers, I think the sympathy of all decent men is with him, and that he will ultimately triumph, but he has much to go through first. I have determined to remain here and do what I possibly can, though I am warned on all hands that my own risk is not inconsiderable, and my family implore me to go away. I do not say this to try and gain credit for myself, for I should be a base coward if I did anything else, considering all I owe to him, and that I am in many ways the innocent cause of this horrible calamity."

It was indeed a horrible time, to be remembered by me not without a shudder for all my days. A wave of terror swept over the Channel, and the city of Calais witnessed a strange invasion. From the arcana of London a thousand guilty consciences, startled into action by the threat of imminent requitals, came fleeing South. Every outgoing steamer numbered

amongst its passengers such nightmare faces as in quiet times one cannot fancy to exist outside the regions of disordered dreams.

My loyalty in friendship lent to misinterpretation. I saw those nightmare faces gathering around me, watching with pale eyes for sympathy, where I had nothing but revolt and horror to give. And though, from my knowledge of him, I could hold my friend guiltless, I had yet, in face of all that came to light, to seek for some justification of my conduct, even to myself, and so I wrote out in large letters and pasted on the wall of my study in my Paris home, the following axiom from the works of the great Belgian philosopher and legislator, Quetelet:

"*La société renferme en elle les germes de tous les crimes qui vont se commettre. C'est elle, en quelque sorte, qui les prépare, et le coupable n'est que l'instrument qui les*

exécute. Tout état social suppose un certain nombre et un certain ordre de crimes qui resultent comme conséquences nécessaires de son organisation."

My recollections of public school and 'Varsity morality in England, enabled me, by the light of the Belgian philosopher, to see a victim rather than a culprit.

For the rest, I was to experience in my own person how such prosecutions are established and carried out. Amongst the people who, because of my well-known friendship with the prisoner in London, insulted me publicly in Paris, was a man who, by his standing in the English colony, was a person of too much importance to be treated merely with contempt. I dragged him before the French Courts, and there, although he recanted piteously, he was sentenced to the highest money penalty allowed of by the French law. The case was maliciously reported in

London, and it became necessary for me, in self-protection, to take action here also. A serious effort was made on behalf of the defendants to justify the abominable innuendo. My portrait was hawked round in all the London hell-holes, and every legitimate effort was made by a respectable detective to associate me with any incident which might warrant the wicked suggestion which had been made to my detriment, because I had not chosen to abandon an unhappy friend, abandoned by all. Legitimate effort having failed, we had an indication that other means were to be tried. I attach in no way blame for this, either to the honourable defendants or to their solicitors. I always supposed that the infernal manœuvre was the work of some infamous firm of detectives, who had taken up the inquiry on speculation, after it had been abandoned by the respectable agents of the defence; and if I record what was

attempted, it is because it shows how such cases, leading to lifelong ruin and dishonour, are got up in London town. Some time before the trial of this action, I was preparing a series of articles on London by Night, and visited a number of disreputable night-clubs. To a typical one in a street off the Tottenham Court Road, I paid frequent visits. One night the barmaid at this house spoke to my solicitor, who had once or twice accompanied me on these curious journeys of exploration. She said, "Tell your friend to be very careful what he does here, and above all not to take any liquor. Last night I heard a man, who is a stranger to me, offer a girl five pounds if she could get your friend intoxicated and drugged to the point of stupefaction, and induce him to leave the club in her company." The intention towards me was only too apparent. No use was made by us of this incident when the action came

for trial, for in bringing it I had no other motive than to justify the friendship of years, and to clear, in this association, the unhappy friend also who was then in prison.

XII

On his arrest, almost immediate ruin followed. His sources of income dried up in one hour; his books were withdrawn from sale; the managers suspended the performance of his plays. His creditors clamoured for payment, judgments were obtained against him, and an execution was put into the house in Tite Street. From affluence he passed suddenly to dire poverty at a time when money was needed for his defence, when the utter lack of resources seemed to hold out the menace that he would be left to face the terrible charges which were being accumulated against him without the means to fee counsel or to prepare evidence.

Towards the beginning of April of that

year, I received from him in Holloway Gaol a letter in which he described how his want of means aggravated his terrible condition, and asked me if I would help him to realise what, in the wreck of his fortune, seemed to be the only asset left.

It will be remembered that Madame Sarah Bernhardt had some time previously accepted his Biblical play, *Salomé*, which he had written in French. It was entirely his own work, for I saw him write it, though the French was revised by M. Marcel Schwob. Licence to produce the play in London had been refused by the Lord Chamberlain's office, on the ground that it was inadvisable to dramatise religious episodes, and this counter to the fact that it is from such dramatisations that the whole, glorious, English drama sprung. In his indignation at this overthrow of very high hopes, Oscar Wilde had declared his intention of leaving England and of applying

for letters of naturalisation as a French citizen. Had he carried this intention into effect, he might be living a happy man to-day, and a terrible scandal would have been avoided.

Sarah Bernhardt had brought the play back to Paris with her, and had promised him to produce it at her own theatre of the Porte St. Martin, as soon as opportunity should permit.

In his letter, accordingly, Wilde asked me to go and see Sarah, to explain his pressing need of money, and to ask her to pay him a sum down for the acting rights of *Salomé*, instead of the royalties which would afterwards accrue to him. He suggested a sum of three or four hundred pounds, as necessary for the purposes of his defence.

I have often wondered since, where I found the nerve and the assurance necessary to execute this commission, which under ordinary circumstances, given my temperament, would have been a physical impossibility. I suppose it was thanks to

my entire devotion to my poor friend, that I never hesitated for a moment, and that the minute after I had read his letter I was driving in a cab to the Boulevard Pereire. Perhaps if I had stopped to reflect on the errand, I should have come to the conclusion, from my knowledge of theatrical folk in general, and of the lady in question in particular, that it would be a useless one, resulting only in humiliation to myself.

I was delighted at the reception that Madame Bernhardt gave me and at the kind way in which she spoke of 'her good friend,' and deplored the calamity which had befallen him. She wrung her hands, and her wonderful eyes moistened with real emotion.

As to the business on which I had come, she put me at my ease at once by the calm way in which, in a commercial spirit, she approached the question. It was a matter of extreme delicacy, this veiled

appeal to her purse; and by her manner of treating it as a simple and natural piece of business, she promptly relieved me of a very uncomfortable feeling.

She declared at once that under existing circumstances it would be impossible for her to produce *Salomé*, and that therefore she would not purchase the play. "But," she added, "I am so sorry for the poor man, and should be so glad to do everything in my power to assist him, that I'll see what money I can give him, as a loan between good friends. Does he say what sum he requires?"

"He mentions a sum of from seven to ten thousand francs," I said, passing her the prison letter.

"I don't know," she said, "what I can do? I must see what money there is at the box-office first, and have a talk with my manager. The season has not been a good one, and you know that I am not a provident

person. Well, we'll see. What I can do I will—the utmost—out of friendship for a great artist, who is also a man of good heart, and who, I am sure, is suffering most unjustly."

I thanked her warmly, and I thought that pity and kindness had made even more wonderful the wonderful beauty of her eyes, even more enchanting, the exquisite sound of her golden voice. I could have gone down on my knees to kiss the hem of her gown. For weeks past my friendship had exposed me to insult. On every side I had heard my friend's name coupled with terms of loathing and execration, and here, before me, was a queen among women, a woman semi-divine in genius and physique, who spoke to me of him with tears in the eyes which have illuminated, and emotion in the voice which has charmed the universe.

I said, "I will telegraph to the prison, for the news of your loyalty to him, even if your hopes cannot be realised, will surely

comfort him. And as to the money, perhaps your secretary would send it to his solicitors, whose address I will give you."

"No, no," she cried. "I want to have nothing to do with solicitors. The money must pass through you. Let me see? To-day is Saturday. Will you call on Monday about this time, and I will have ready for you whatever I am able to spare so gladly for the poor man!"

As soon as I had left the house on the Boulevard Pereire, I drove to the nearest telegraph office and sent off a long telegram to my friend in Holloway Gaol, promising him funds for the following week, and describing the sympathy and affection with which the great French actress had spoken of him. For the first time for many days I felt in some way reassured, and not without hope for the future.

On Monday, at the hour appointed, I called on Madame Bernhardt. In the meanwhile I

had received from London instructions by telegraph as to how I was to remit the money which I was about to receive. A disappointment, however, awaited me, for Madame's little black page, who answered the door, told me that his mistress had gone out, and would not return that afternoon. No message had been left for me.

I returned on the Tuesday, and again the black page informed me that Madame was absent, nor expected to return until late at night. He grinned as he spoke, and, anticipating my question, added "and nothing has been left for you."

I felt like a detected begging impostor as I walked away. However, my own feelings had not to be consulted in the matter. I had to remember the dreadful plight in which my poor friend found himself, and all that might depend on his obtaining the promised assistance. Accordingly, on the morrow I returned to the Boulevard Pereire. Madame

OSCAR WILDE WHEN IN AMERICA, 1883.

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was again out, and no suggestion could be offered me as to where I was likely to find her. It occurred to me, however, that she very probably had gone to the Vernissage of the Salon, and I at once drove off there. I heard here that she was visiting the exhibition, and I spent a good hour in tracking her. I remember that M. Zola was one of the people of whom I asked my oft-repeated question, "Have you seen Sarah Bernhardt? Where is Sarah Bernhardt?"

At last I came up with her, and found her discoursing on an exhibition of pottery to a group of friends, who, in their turn, were surrounded by a large crowd of admiring onlookers. With the persistence of a dun, or process-server, I elbowed my way into the front rank of the crowd of which she was the centre, and as soon as she had turned in my direction I raised my hat.

She smiled very graciously, and addressing me by my name said, "I think I asked you to call on me on Monday."

I answered in the affirmative, and added, "May I present myself to-morrow?"

She said, "Let me see? No, don't come to-morrow, but come on Friday."

I thanked her, and hurried off to send a fresh telegram to London.

On Friday I was told that Madame was engaged with her daughter-in-law, and was begged to return on the morrow. I returned on Saturday, and this time the answer given at the door was, that Madame was working at her sculpture with a model and could not be disturbed, and that I need not call again, as she would write to me.

I waited several days for the promised letter, but as nothing came, I wrote to her to say that I quite understood that circumstances might have arisen to prevent her from giving effect to her kind promises and generous offer, but that as the unhappy man in Holloway had been lured by my telegrams into false hopes, she would render me a

signal service by causing her secretary to send me a few lines, which would serve as my discharge towards our mutual friend. My own pen having invariably been at her service for many years, and under circumstances where she had not been sorry to find a champion, I fully expected an answer which I could have sent to Wilde, so as to show him that I had not neglected his service in his general abandonment. I never received any reply to my letter. It was what one might have expected, as the world goes, but it grieved me deeply. I began to realise how deep my friend had fallen.

I explained all the circumstances in a long letter to him, in which I also related how I was being harassed. He wrote me in reply the following letter. I may be charged with a want of modesty in printing it, but my personality is of no account in this narrative, the story of an unhappy friendship.

L.P.
C. 4

From *Wilde*,
H. M. Prison,
Holloway,
16–4–1895.

B. 2–4
3.56.

My Dear Robert,—You good, daring reckless friend! I was delighted to get your letter, with all its wonderful news. For myself, I am ill — apathetic. Slowly life creeps out of me. Nothing but Alfred Douglas' daily visits quicken me into life, and even him I only see under humiliating and tragic conditions.

Don't fight more than 6 duels a week! I suppose Sarah is hopeless; but your chivalrous friendship—your fine, chivalrous friendship—is worth more than all the money in the world.—Yours, Oscar.

I have related in detail this incident because it is typical of what I had to undergo in humiliation during those dreadful

days. For the rest, I could find consolation nowhere. By everybody who approached me, the man against whom at that time there was not the shadow of a proof was already convicted and condemned to eternal ignominy. The papers in Paris, prejudging the case, according to their invariable custom, were filled with denunciations of him. The English residents seemed to take special delight in spreading the scandal, which was really far more a discredit to their nation than to the unhappy individual who at that time might be considered an innocent man. I found not a single countryman to back me up in the demand which I repeatedly made, both in public and in private, that until after his trial my friend's guilt should not be affirmed. I was altogether alone; and though I suffered cruelly at the injustice of the world, I had at heart a secret pleasure in feeling that never once, at the bidding of social or professional

interest, had I denied my friend. My championship of him may have been in some degree indiscreet; but in the whirl of the tragedy which enveloped me, I had lost the just perception of things.

XIII

I SHALL always remember, as one of the most painful episodes of my life, the afternoon of the day on which Oscar Wilde's first trial closed.

Dreading what news the evening might bring, I had made no arrangement to be informed of it from London, and had determined to spend those fateful hours in silence, retirement, prayer, and hope. However, soon after midday an Englishman came to my house to tell me that a telegram was expected from the Old Bailey in the course of the afternoon at an English bar in the St. Honoré Quarter, and suggested that we should go there and wait for the news.

There are times, when one takes a perverse delight in going to meet distress of mind, possibly because one flatters oneself that he has abundant resources of courage and resistance with which to face it. I went accordingly, and, amidst pothouse surroundings, waited with the anxiety of one, the life of whose dearest friend is at stake.

A coarse crowd of Englishmen, journalists, bookmakers and racing-touts surrounded the bar, which, in the exhilaration and excitement of the hour, did excellent trade. Bets as to the verdict were freely made, though, from the odds offered, there seemed to be but little doubt of a conviction. An incomprehensible hostility animated the conversation against the prisoner, yet almost without exception those who so discoursed were past-masters in every form of vice. The lewd faces, flushed with alcohol, mouthing imprecations against the unhappy man, at that moment in such dire straits,

suggested a picture such as Goya might have painted of a dream of the corridors of Hell. Filthy jests were bandied over the clinking tumblers. There was more deliberate vice engendered in that hour than many an unconscious madman crowds into his whole, irresponsible career.

At last the blue envelope was handed over the bar-counter—the eagerly expected telegram from the Old Bailey. It was torn open, perused with gloating eyes, and flung down with an oath of bitter disappointment. The trial was over, the jury had disagreed, and the presumption was that a soul had been snatched from perdition. In the odious clamour of baulked cruelty that arose, hope within me began to lift its head, and I hastened off to communicate with my friend, leaving the rest to discuss the chance that a fresh trial would be ordered, and that the man might yet be crushed.

It was not till the following night that I

received news from him—a telegram—brief and ominous, "Still in Holloway. Oscar." which seemed to confirm what I had heard in the course of the day, namely, that by the pique of the Treasury counsel, at a hasty word from the defence in the flush of its partial success, a new trial was to be proceeded with, and a fresh period of torture had opened before us.

Yet, in consolation, there was the rumour that the prison gates would soon be opened, and that, though substantial bail would be exacted, so that appearances might be safeguarded and popular clamour appeased, it would be fixed at a sum which could easily be raised by the prisoner's friends,—which implied that the authorities, though obliged to continue the prosecution, were anxious to give the prisoner a chance to end the scandal and ensure his own safety by fleeing the country. And indeed there never has been a doubt in my mind, that if he had left

England when he had the occasion to do so, he would have won the gratitude of every official, from the Home Secretary downwards. And I am not speaking on supposition only. The subsequent vindictiveness with which he was treated, was the reparation officially exacted from him for an attitude which was a credit to himself and an honour to his friends.

As soon as it was known in Paris that he had been released on bail, the nightmare faces which had become familiar on the boulevards were seen to peep and peer. But he gave no sign, and all one knew of his doings was from the reports in the papers, which one day placed him here, and next day showed him there. From the mendacious tales we read, a poignant feeling grew upon me that his dubious triumph had turned his head, that he was flaunting his notoriety with display, defying public opinion with an unconsciousness which was inconceivable to those who knew his real character.

And then, late one night, I was aroused by the arrival of a telegram from some friends of his, asking me to come to London to take him into the country. I confess that it occurred to me that another service was required of me—that one preposition had been purposely substituted for another. But I did not pause to reflect. I threw a few things into a bag, and leaving my home and my occupations to console themselves for my absence in the best way they could devise, I took the early train to London. I was at the Gare du Nord fully an hour before the train started, and never did a journey appear longer to me.

I was met at Victoria, by one of the friends who had telegraphed to me, and learned from him that the message meant just what it said. Oscar Wilde was in London, and in such a state of neurosis that it was thought it would be good for him to go into the country, pending the day on which he would have

to surrender. A companion being necessary, I had been thought of. It was suggested we should go up the river together.

It was in Chelsea again, that I met my friend, whom I had last seen, superb in prosperity and luxury, in that same quarter. But how changed, and under conditions how different!

I do not know of many incidents in the lives of distinguished men more tragic than those which occurred during the first hours of Oscar Wilde's regained liberty. I was deeply impressed by their horror, and I afterwards spoke of them to two friends, Hall Caine and Edmond de Goncourt. The English novelist found the story so horrible that I think one finds an echo of it in his account of the martyrdom of John Storm. M. de Goncourt transferred it to his diary, *Le Journal des Goncourt*, but added certain comments and details for which I disclaim all responsibility.

On leaving the prison after his bail had been accepted, he had driven to an hotel. It was late in the evening. Two rooms were engaged for him and dinner was ordered. Just as he had sat down to table, the manager roughly entered the room and said, "You are Oscar Wilde, I believe." Then he added, "You must leave the house at once."

From this hotel he drove to another in a distant part of London, where he was not known nor recognised. He had sunk down exhausted on the bed of the room he had engaged when the landlord appeared. He had been followed from his last refuge by a band of men, prize-fighters, and had been denounced in the hall below. The landlord expressed his regret, but insisted on his leaving. "The men say they will sack the house and raise the street if you stay here a moment longer."

At last, long past midnight, Willy Wilde, in

his mother's house in Oakley Street, heard a feeble rap at the front door. Opening it, he saw his brother, who, white as death, reeled forward into the passage. "Give me shelter, Willy," he cried. "Let me lie on the floor, or I shall die in the streets."

"He came like a hunted stag," said poor Willy, "and fell down on the threshold."

He had been there ever since—there, where he should be, with his own people, who loved him. Whilst the lying papers were inventing a Fool's Progress for him in fashionable resorts, he was waiting in utter prostration—just waiting. That awful night of the cruel chase from the prison gates to his mother's humble roof had revealed the true aspect of his position to him. I think he never hopes again.

My friend was in bed, when I reached Oakley Street, and after awhile I was shown up to his room. It was a poorly furnished room, in great disorder. He was lying on a

small camp-bedstead in a corner between the fireplace and the wall, and in a glass on a mantelpiece was an arum lily, sere and yellow, which drooped lamentably down over his head. His face was flushed and swollen, his voice was broken, he was a man altogether collapsed. I sat down on the bed and took his hand in mine and tried to comfort him. I remember that I made him laugh by speaking of "Die Wilde Jagd,"—a stupid play of words, no doubt, which however effected its purpose of bringing some life into the apathetic face. And in reference to this German poem, I asked him if he remembered how he had beguiled the tedium of the journeys during his lecturing tour in England, by studying that language with a copy of the Reise-Bilder and a little pocket dictionary. And I added, "Has not a new Reise-Bild been suggested to you?"

He made no answer, only a gesture that

he was too exhausted to do anything but lie inert, and after awhile he asked me, "Oh, why have you brought me no poison from Paris?" He frequently repeated this question, not only that evening but on many following days—not, I am sure, because he had really ever any wish to commit suicide, but because the alliteration of the phrase pleased his ear.

It irritated mine, under the circumstances, for I did not think the time opportune for insincerity and posturings, and one day I said, "It is very easy to make prussic acid if you really wish to kill yourself. I had a friend in Paris who distilled a mash of bitter almonds, which you can procure at any grocer's, over a spirit-lamp, with a little retort affixed. Whilst the stuff was brewing he lay on his bed and smoked cigarettes. We found the stumps of eight or nine when we broke into the room. He was dead, on the floor. However," I added, "prussic acid is by no means always so rapid in its effect as is

generally believed. I looked the subject up on your behalf this afternoon at the club, and I find there have been cases where death has only ensued forty minutes after the absorption of this poison—forty minutes of indescribable agony."

I visited him every day, and stayed with him almost all the time. When the subject of flight was discussed, I declared that in my opinion it was the best thing that he could do, not only in his own interests, but in those of the public also; and I offered to take the whole care and responsibility of the evasion on my shoulders, with all the odium that would afterwards attach to me. "'If I were accused, said Montaigne,' I quoted, 'of stealing the towers of Notre Dame Cathedral, the very first thing I should do would be to cross the frontier.' You have stood one trial, and the fact that you have been released on bail shows that they want you to go."

As a matter of fact, he was at no time under observation, of which by various counter-police manœuvres I was able to convince myself, and could have left England in open day at any time up to the last day of his second trial.

When, to-day, I read in the fashionable gazettes of the movements of people who, involved in the same scandal, were wise enough to leave the country, or see in Piccadilly, radiant now and serene, those awful faces that flecked the boulevards then with patches of pale terror, and think of what he endured, and to what an end his endurance brought him, I do not regret that I urged upon him to avoid a second trial and to flee the country, which was mutely beseeching him to go. Yet I cannot deny that here also my egotism betrayed itself. I could not bear to face the prospect of his conviction, for I felt assured that the disgrace and the suffering of imprisonment

would kill a friend who in his misfortune had become dearer than ever to me.

But, imitative of great men in their whims and fancies, he refused to imitate the base in acts which he deemed cowardly. I do not think he ever seriously considered the question of leaving the country, and this in spite of the fact that the gentleman who was responsible for almost the whole amount of the bail had said, "It will practically ruin me if I lose all that money at the present moment, but if there is a chance even of conviction, in God's name let him go." This young man was one of the beautiful figures in the Walpurgis-night crowd that comes up before one's eyes when one thinks of those days. I saw him last standing by the dock in the Old Bailey whilst sentence was being passed, and there were tears in his eyes. He had been in no way involved in the wretched business; he had only had a casual acquaintance with the prisoner, but

there were reasons for which his high sense of honour prompted him to come to his side and to help him to the utmost of his power. A great name, a wife and children, and a meagre competence—he risked them all from a feeling of duty. He is in stature a little man, but he has a great heart; and at a time when humanity filled one with nausea, he showed how good, how sweet, how beautiful a man can be.

It may have been to some extent out of consideration for him that Oscar Wilde refused to forfeit his bail, but the main impulse, unless it were unconsciousness of guilt, such as characterises a number of cerebral disorders of the epileptiform variety, was self-respect or pride. "I could not bear life," he said, "if I were to flee. I cannot see myself slinking about the Continent, a fugitive from justice."

His brother Willy took up the same attitude on the question. "Oscar will not

run away," he said. "He is an Irish gentleman, and he will stay to face the music."

In Oakley Street there were great hopes of an acquittal, based on the result of the first trial. It was not then known that on that occasion one juryman alone had stood out against his eleven colleagues, who, without discussion, wished to convict. This juror, it appears, had once previously sat on a jury which had convicted an innocent man on such evidence as was brought against Wilde, and he had vowed that he never would convict upon such evidence again.

For myself, I could form no opinion. If I was able to convince myself, by what I heard on every side, that never had public hatred blazed fiercer against any man, and that it was humanly impossible to expect to find twelve men in London who would come to sit on the jury with unbiassed minds, or with the moral courage necessary to resist

the pressure of public opinion, I felt on the other hand so incredulous of my friend's guilt—an incredulity greatly strengthened by my fresh association with him—that it seemed to me that he must produce the same impression on everybody else who saw and heard him, and that, on his trial, the jury would be incredulous also.

As to him, he never referred to the past in my presence; and the only words he said which might have been construed into an admission were these, "Fortune had so turned my head that I fancied I could do whatever I chose."

XIV

It was indeed a Walpurgis-night's crowd that flitted in and out and around of that dull Chelsea Road in the days of which I am writing. Strange faces pried at corners, and after nightfall phantom forms drifted past with the river mists. Lombroso would have exulted after a week in that London spring, and not Lombroso only, but all who are curious as to what is abnormal, and weird, and asymmetrical in mankind. There was one face which often rises up before me, a face full of the intentness of the fixed idea, the face of a man who was always hurrying from place to place with a spirit-lamp and matches in his pocket, with no other

thought nor preoccupation in life than to rout out letters and to burn and burn. He was the unhumorous Wemmick of a tragic situation, a man whom the horror of the time had scared into a monomania of destroying documents by fire. There was another face which was always rippling with such laughter as one hears in Bedlam. There were long, gaunt, Calvinistic faces, with a strange glint in the eyes and uneasy movements of the lips. There were anxious, busy faces, with greedy eyes peering for spoil—the faces of the wreckers, who hoped in the eddy where the great ship had sunk to harpoon and draw to themselves some valuable flotsam—one an unpublished manuscript, the other a scenario, another a marketable idea. And baser plunderers yet! One would have, in the event, no use for a fur coat, and any jewellery would be a pleasing souvenir.

I do not say that these people frequented

the house in Oakley Street—indeed, my friend's isolation was almost complete—but these were they who dodged in and out of the gloom which had settled down upon us. I have often thought that this period was in his mind when he wrote those lines in his "Ballad of Reading Gaol," in which he describes the night that preceded the trooper's execution.

Very few of his former friends came to see him. Possibly, to many it was not known that he had remained in London, or where he was to be found. I can only remember one call during that period. There may have been others, but I remember this one only.

The caller was a well known litterateur and journalist, a man in an excellent position, who then and afterwards warmly befriended Oscar Wilde, for whom he had a deep admiration. It was he who, after his release from prison, offered to take him for a

coaching tour through France, an offer which was unfortunately refused.

He came into the room in a bright, brisk way and said, "I have come to take you out, Oscar. You mustn't mope here all day."

"Where do you think of taking him to?" asked Willy.

"To the Café Royal, if he'll come."

I cried out, "That's fine of you, ——."

But Oscar Wilde shook his head. "It wouldn't be seemly," he said, "for me to defy public opinion."

I do not think that the courage was lacking him to protest by an appearance in a public place against the unfair prejudice which condemned him, untried and unconvicted. It seemed rather to him a question of taste and delicacy. But I know that I felt a great admiration for his friend who had offered to affront this prejudice, so as to show London that he did not share it.

I brought one visitor myself to Oakley Street, whom Oscar Wilde was very pleased to see. This was poor Ernest Dowson, the poet, who died under tragic conditions in 1900, in a poor cottage to which I had brought him, ragged, starving, and abandoned. He spent an hour or two at Oakley Street, and managed to comfort our friend by his mere presence. Dowson was a scholar and a master of English prose, and, as such, was greatly admired by Oscar Wilde.

I had thought that letters of abuse would be showered upon him, but most of his would-be correspondents no doubt ignored his address, and he was saved this annoyance at least. Not that any letter of abuse would have affected him much, for he seemed indifferent to all things. I remember an incident which occurred on the night which preceded the first day of his trial. Had I been in his position it would have gladdened me. We were sitting in the front room of

the house in Oakley Street when we heard a cab drive up, and then there came a knock at the door. I went out to answer it, and having opened the door, saw the tall figure of a lady whose face was veiled. She thrust a packet into my hand and said, "For Mr. Oscar Wilde," and hurried down the steps. It was a horseshoe with a bouquet of violets attached, and on a piece of paper were the words "For Luck." He said nothing, but laid the guerdon aside, with a gesture of complete indifference. Nor was he in the least amused by a long letter which he received from Madrid, and which he asked me to translate to him. I think, under other circumstances, it would have made him smile. It was from the Spanish prisoner with whose missives most of us whose names figure in the papers are familiar, but in this instance the appeal for funds was based, not on the imaginary treasure, but on the community of misfortune. If I remember rightly, the

knave endeavoured to establish some degree of blood-relationship between himself and Wilde. I did not finish the letter, for after listening to the first few passages he waved it aside.

It was pitiful to me to watch his moral agony. I sat with him sometimes for more than an hour without speaking. Now and then the oppression on his breast would relieve itself in a sigh. I could imagine the workings of that fine brain and the horrors that his fancy evoked. Hope conflicting with doubt, the awful prospect before him, the wild regret of his folly, were like so many demons that unceasingly harried him. He suffered all the tortures of brain-fever without its merciful coma. For the rest, he was in high fever all the time, as was shown by his devouring thirst. He consumed gallons of liquid daily, and I was running out time and time again to fetch lemonade and soda-water and claret from the grocery at the end of the

street,—in connection with which errands I may record as a psychological fact, that I had great delight in doing menial work for my poor friend who had been so humbled.

When we did speak, it was, as usual, on matters of literature, but with what deep distress I observed that he spoke as a man to whom all these things, in which he had once rejoiced, were dead. I thought of a passage in Dostoievski. One evening he was bright. He had a volume of Wordsworth, and had been reading some of the sonnets with me. We came upon one in which my 'illustrious ancestor,' as Oscar Wilde used to call him, had rhymed 'shove' to 'love'; and "Robert, Robert," he said, in a tone of mock reproach, "what does this mean?" And he laughed in his old joyous, boyish way. But a few minutes later he relapsed into the awful silence that was so eloquent to me, the silence which now and again was broken by a heavy sigh.

Yet, my admiration for the nobility of character which he displayed, helped me to bear the tragedy, long drawn out, of those cruel days. Not one word of recrimination ever passed his lips. He attached blame to no one. He sought to involve no one. He had no thought of vengeance, or even of resentment, against those who had encompassed his so formidable ruin. He bent his broad shoulders, and essayed with his sole strength to bear the crushing burden of infamy and fate. He never showed himself to me more fine than in the days when the whole world was shouting out that he was of men the vilest.

He was prepared for his punishment, although hope lingered to the last; but he flattered himself that, under the various circumstances of the case, some leniency would be shown him. "I think," he said, "that I could live through one year's imprisonment."

I told him that it was folly to count on leniency in the state of public opinion; and added, that if he decided to face his second trial, he must make up his mind to undergo two years' hard labour. He said, "I couldn't do it. Not two years—not two years."

I made it as clear as I could to him that there would and could be no other issue to his second trial, and I fancy that I convinced him. But not once, I feel sure, did he seriously think of flight. His courage here must be remembered by those who judge him.

XV

I HAD looked forward to the spring of that year for a visit to London under very different circumstances—for a time of real happiness.

For Alphonse Daudet, who had admitted me to his friendship, had long previously invited me to accompany him and his family on their first visit to England,—"a journey," he said, "which I must make before I pass my musket to my left shoulder." I could fancy for myself no more delightful holiday than one spent in such company, were it only to receive at first-hand the impressions which my native town and my countrymen might make on an observer so shrewd, from the moment of landing. But it was not to be.

In the turmoil of my trouble, I had altogether forgotten what had been arranged between us. I had not even written to my friend when I left Paris, and it was only by the announcement of his arrival in town in the papers that I was recalled to the remembrance of the pleasures anticipated. On reading this announcement, my first impulse was to avoid his presence; for, strongly attached to him as I was, not only by his unvarying kindness to me, but also by his flattering appreciation of my work, I was more attached still to the friend of my youth, and felt strong resentment against those who could not sympathise with him in his awful fall. Now, I knew that in Daudet I should find no sympathy at all. He had expressed himself very strongly to me on the subject of the accusation against Wilde, and one of the things which, I remember, he repeated to me was, "You see, Sherard, you are not a father. If you were, you would share my

horror and indignation." And then, here was offered me the choice between the rising and the setting sun, between London's lion and the scapegoat of England, and my faith, my nature prompted me to prefer ord and shard to wreaths and incense. It was Oscar Wilde himself who urged me to go to Dover Street, and one day, that he had gone out with a friend, I followed his advice.

I am afraid that I did not contribute to Daudet's enjoyment of his visit to London. I had the fixed idea of my friend's disaster ever in my mind. I was restless when away from Oakley Street, and at all times reproached myself when the joy of that bright assembly in Brown's Hotel overlapped the sombre melancholy of my sympathising soul. There were the glad Alphonse Daudet, filling the grey atmosphere of a London room with ripples of Southern sunshine; his beautiful wife, and the fairy daughter, Edmée, de Goncourt's godchild; the handsome sons,

George Hugo, with his exquisite wife—a bright, elegant triumph crowd, moving in a frame of luxury amidst the homages of the elect of London. The rooms overflowed with floral tributes, the great names of England rang out in the corridors. All here was pleasure and satisfaction and success. I met here for the first time many of the foremost writers in London, to whom I was presented by Alphonse Daudet in terms which illuminated my obscurity. I was included, as his friend, in many invitations which would have opened the best houses in London to me. The ball was at my feet.

Yes, the ball was at my feet, but it was a ball chained to my ankle—such a ball as unhappy men used to drag after them in the bagnios of Brest and Toulon. And my bagnio was the poor home in Oakley Street. I was never happy when I was away from it, and I know that I took more pleasure in fetching and carrying for my poor

friend's needs than in parading Piccadilly on mundane errands with the elegant courtiers of the man who was just then the talk of London.

I had been unjust to Daudet. He did sympathise, and deeply, not only with me in my distress, but in the awful case of Oscar Wilde. When we were alone together in his room in the hotel, I pacing the room feverishly, with the ill-disguised longing to hurry away, he, sitting on the sofa, both with cigarettes lighted, his beautiful face used to light up under the grey shadow of his constant pain ; and, "Now, my son," he would say, "speak to me of your friend." Ah, then the time seemed to drag no longer. Yet he always reverted to the fact that I had no comprehension of the evil, and this I admitted; and I once told him that the very wickedest man in the world, in conversation with me, had displayed the same ignorance of horrors with which the smallest elf of the

London gutter seemed to be familiar. He was deeply interested in my accounts of my friend's moral state from day to day, and once, I remember, he expressed great satisfaction at something that Oscar Wilde had said. What it was I forget, but a day or two later, when I had recorded some flippancy, he burst out angrily, "Oh, voilà. The other day, when disaster was imminent, he aroused himself. Now that he thinks he has weathered the rocks, he becomes *un imbecile* once more."

I longed to bring the two together, but I did not dare to suggest it to Daudet, because the only possible place for the meeting would have been Daudet's rooms. He was too ill to go out, and could not have borne the fatigue of a drive to Chelsea. And he would never have consented to receive Wilde where his children might have met him. Had he been able to go to Chelsea, I think I could have prevailed on him to come and

bring to the stricken soul the sunny comfort of his words. Alphonse Daudet was a worldly man, but his knowledge of the world, united to the great tenderness of his large heart, made him as a father-confessor to those in stress of circumstance or of conscience.

I used to speak of him in Oakley Street at first, but I soon saw that it distressed my friend. Perhaps it suggested to him what part he would have played under other circumstances in the social reception of the great French novelist. Perhaps it reminded him of the things in which he had once rejoiced, and which now were dead to him.

I have said that Daudet pitied my distress, and this is the proof he gave me of this. One day he said to me, "I cannot go out much with the others, and you, my friend, seem to be losing your taste for work. Let us do a book together."

"A collaboration with Alphonse Daudet?" I cried.

"Yes. In a way it will be a collaboration," he said. "I will tell you a story of my youth, and you will take notes, and you will ask me questions, and the book will be a kind of *roman-interview* — something quite novel. We will divide whatever it brings, as I did with Hugues Leroux with the book we wrote together, and later on I will write it over again for myself in French."

At any other time such an offer, coming from such a man, would have filled me with joy and pride. Coming then, it came when I felt that nothing could console me. However, I accepted it, with expressions of gratitude.

When I mentioned the suggestion that Daudet had made to me, in Oakley Street that night, Wilde exclaimed, "What a discontented fellow you are, Robert! A high honour has been done to you, and you speak

of it almost with regret." And I: "Yes, Oscar. If things were all right with you, this would have made me happier than anything that has happened to me in my career. But as it is——"

Daudet and I began the book, *My First Voyage. My First Lie*, the next day. I wish that I still possessed the manuscript of that first day's work. It was in the shape of notes on the hotel paper, and it would recall to me to-day my state of mind at the time. I had no pleasure in it. It barely diverted my thoughts. The notes were like those hieroglyphics which a man distraught pencils with an unconscious brain. My *alter* was elsewhere; yet when, many months later, I came to write the book, every detail of the sitting, every word that Daudet had said, indeed almost his every gesture, unperceived at the time, came vividly back to me.

XVI

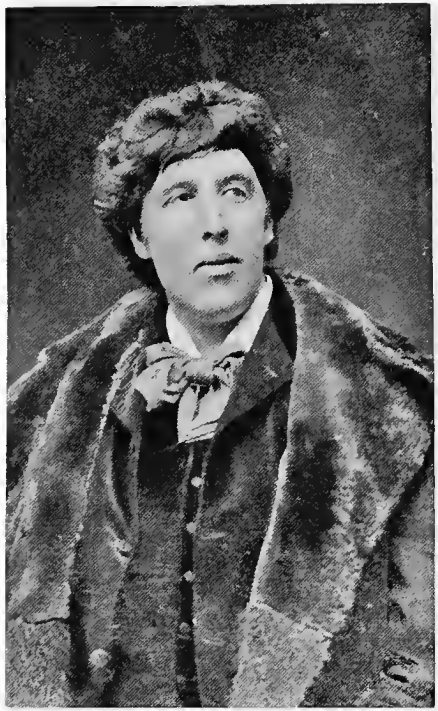
THE day of the trial dawned as a day of relief to all of us in Oakley Street, but to none more so than to my unhappy friend. It had never entered my mind to be present at the Old Bailey, where he was to be exposed to such humiliations. We breakfasted together, and afterwards one of the men who had found his bail came to escort him to surrender. This man was bright and cheerful. "I have a nice carriage to drive there in," he said, "and I have retained a nice room near the Old Bailey, to which he can retire during the intervals."

I remember saying, "You would have done much better to retain a nice room for him on the Calle del Sol in Madrid." I

never hoped for a moment that the trial would be otherwise than fatal to him.

I have no recollection of the impressions of those days, save that they were days of shifting hopes and fears. The town was placarded with his name; and one night, alluding to this, I said, "Well, you have got your name before the public at last." He laughed and said, "Nobody can pretend now not to have heard of it."

I did not read the papers, and all I knew of the progress of the trial was what I gathered from the announcements on the posters and what little was said in Oakley Street when the accused returned home. But there was nothing to encourage me, and what I dreaded most was the effect he would produce when placed in person in the witness-box. I feared his bent for flippancy and paradox would dispose the jury against him; but what disturbed me most was, that he was obviously in no state of health to



OSCAR WILDE, ÆSTHETIC PERIOD, ABOUT 1884.

(R. W. Thrupp, Photo^r, Birmingham.)

To face p. 184.

defend himself effectively. His nerve was all gone, and I feared that his physical collapse would be construed as a sign of the consciousness of guilt. He himself dreaded this ordeal. "I shall break down," he said, the evening before. "I know that I shall break down." I understood, however, from those that were present, that he acquitted himself with courage and dignity.

There was one evening when everybody was glad, and when I was pointed at as a prophet of evil and a foolish counsellor. It was the evening of the day on which the judge had contemptuously pitchforked back on to the dungheap, from which it had exuded, a certain part of the Evidence.

On the eve of the fatal last day, however, everybody seemed resigned for the worst. He was very fine, and I admired him greatly. His old serenity had come back to him. His face was calm ; all traces of nervousness had gone; there was a manliness in his

bearing which years of self-indulgence had masked till then. He spent his last evening in arranging for his mother's needs in the event of a forced separation, and disposed of the few trinkets of which he had not been plundered, as souvenirs to his friends. He retired early, taking leave of those assembled in turn. I put my arms round his neck and embraced him, and I said, "God bless you, Oscar," for I thought that I should never see him again. Apart from my conduct, which was prompted by my great sorrow and a weakness of nerve which bordered on hysteria, that farewell-taking was not lacking in dignity. And the cruelty of it was, that but for the charge against him, his attitude that night in the face of imminent danger would have authorised his friends to proclaim the man a hero.

I had thought that I should never see him again. But as that dreadful Saturday dragged on, the impulse grew stronger and

stronger within me to go to him, so as to be with him at the end. In the afternoon then, meeting Ernest Dowson, I asked him to accompany me to the Old Bailey. We drove there, and as we alighted in front of the court-house, a shout arose from the rabble that thronged the street, "Here are some more aristocrats! Here are some more of them!"

I said to Dowson, as we passed through the doorway which leads into the little yard between the court-house and Newgate, "That shout explains that much of the popular execration of our friend proceeds from class hatred. He represents the aristocrat, poor fellow, to them, and they are exulting in the downfall of an aristocrat."

We found a few friends in the passage from which judge and barristers by one staircase, and witnesses by another, reach the court-room, and I heard that after a deadly summing-up the jury had retired,

There could be no hope of a favourable verdict. I was fully prepared for this news, but none the less it came as a shock. A friend diverted my thoughts by pointing to something on the other side of the yard—a something that was seated on a bench,—a multiple something that was giggling and chatting and smoking cigarettes. It was The Evidence. After awhile, a friend came out of the Court and told me that if I cared to come in, there was a place for me. I entered, and found the room by no means as crowded as I had expected, and amongst those present very few faces that I recognised. My friend was sitting in the dock, covering a sheet of paper with innumerable Deltas. I saluted him, but he only acknowledged my greeting with the faintest inclination of the head. I sat down on the bench behind the counsel for the Crown, and next to a barrister who was a friend of mine. He whispered to me that all chance was

gone. Still, the jury were a long time in discussion, and each minute strengthened hope. After a long while we heard a bell, an usher came bustling in, and a great silence fell upon the buzzing Court. It was the silence of a beast of prey which, to seize its victim, opens a yawning mouth, and perforce suspends its roar. But it was a false alarm. The jury had sent a question to the judge.

"That means an acquittal," said the Treasury counsel.

"No, no, no," said Sir Edward, shaking his head.

"Thus do they compliment each other," I whispered to my neighbour. The Treasury counsel overheard my whisper, and turned round, with a mighty face suffused with joviality. It was like a sudden sun in a very evil mist, and it quite cheered me to see that my friend's adversary was such a pleasant gentleman. And still the minutes went by. "There may be another disagreement," said

my friend. But whilst he yet spoke the die had been cast.

I noticed that the judge's hand shook as in a palsy as he arranged his papers on the desk. As to the jury, a glance at their faces was sufficient. Six questions had been put to them, and "Guilty" was the answer to each. Such was the foreman's enthusiasm of conviction, that to the question "Is that the verdict of you all?" he answered with another "Guilty,"—a piece of overweight—a bonus to public opinion. I had laid my head down on my arms at the first "Guilty" and groaned, and each fresh condemnation, like a lash on my back, drew from me an exclamation of pain.

I could not look at my friend. Amongst all those eyes turned on him in that moment, he should not notice mine. But I looked at him when the judge was passing sentence, and the face is one I shall never forget. It was flushed purple, the eyes protruded, and over

all was an expression of extreme horror. When the judge had finished speaking, and whilst a whirr of satisfaction buzzed through the Court, Wilde, who had recovered himself, said, "And I? May I say nothing, my lord?" But the judge made no answer —only an impatient sign with his hand to the warders. I jumped up, to do what or say what I cannot fancy, but was pulled down by my friend the barrister. "You'll do no good," he said, "and you'll be sent to Holloway."

Warders touched my poor friend on the shoulder. He shuddered and gave one wild look round the Court. Then he turned and lumbered forward to the head of the stairs which led to the bottomless pit. He was swept down and disappeared.

As I staggered down the steps to leave the court-house, I dimly heard the cries of exultation which those crowding down with

me were uttering. But this fiendish joy in the ruin of a life was to be impressed upon me still more vividly. For when the verdict and the sentence on 'the aristocrat' reached the rabble in Old Bailey, men and women joined hands and danced an ungainly farandole, where ragged petticoats and yawning boots flung up the London mud in *feu de joie*, and the hideous faces were distorted with savage triumph. I stood and watched this dance of death for a few minutes, regretting that Veretschagin was not by my side; and whilst I was standing there, I saw The Evidence, still laughing and smoking cigarettes, being driven off in cabs. And I said to Dowson, "This is a trial in which, out of nine people incriminated, eight have been admitted to act as Queen's Evidence." Then we walked on—I as in a dream.

That evening I went to see Daudet. He said, "This is a fine country. I admire a country where justice is administered as it is

here, as is shown by to-day's verdict and sentence."

I said nothing, for there was nothing to say, and there was nothing to do but to bend under the inevitable. I dined with the Daudets and a Lord Somebody that night, and the dinner was a luxurious one. But every mouthful I took had a strange savour, for I was thinking of what poor Wilde might at that moment be scooping out of a greasy pannikin with a wooden spoon, and the thought flavoured all the sauces of that dinner.

I know little of his prison life, for I never spoke to him on the subject after his release, and what I do know is from hearsay only, but it appears that that first evening in Wandsworth Gaol was to him one of terrible suffering—indeed, that he revolted when he was told to enter a filthy bath in which other prisoners had preceded him. But his experiences cannot have been worse than I pictured them.

Daudet was very kind to me all the evening; and when I was leaving, he invited me to come early on the morrow, so that we might have a long time at our book; "For," he said, "it is in work only that you will find consolation."

"Ah, yes," I answered; "but when the mainspring is broken and one can work no longer——"

It was on the following day, I think, that I said to him, "I want to write a story, *maître*, which I shall call "The Misanthrope by Philanthropy,"—the story of a man who becomes a hermit because he has a tender and a susceptible heart, and wishes to escape the certain suffering which would fall to his lot, if he lived in the world, and formed attachments and grew fond of friends."

XVII

After my friend's definite ruin had been consummated, it seemed to me, though still a young man in the full tide of success, that my life was finished. I had received from fate one of those crushing blows, under the first impact of which one hopes not to recover. My mental and moral condition resembled those of the unhappy youth in that pitiful story of poor Guy de Maupassant, "Garçon! Un Bock." I had no heart for my work, although at last, after years of struggle, I had descended from the seventh floor garret in the Rue de Castiglione, where my literary carrer commenced, to the opulence of a boulevard *deuxième*, with a country-house for relaxation, and an income

much exceeding the figure that Sir Walter Besant fixed as the tangible proof of professional success.

I could live in Paris no longer. I felt that I ought to be in the country where my friend was, so as to be near him, and able to do anything on his behalf that might present itself to be done. So, after completing with Alphonse Daudet the outline of our book, I abandoned my engagements in Paris, and returned to England, making a temporary home in a suburb where I was within easy distance of Wandsworth Gaol, where Oscar Wilde was confined. And here, in a dazed condition, I waited for the first opportunity of visiting him. This occurred in August, when he became entitled to his first quarterly visit. The ticket which was sent me from the prison would have admitted another visitor, but though I wrote to different friends of his, I could find nobody to accompany me.

Everybody was unfortunately engaged, but I was charged with many kind messages. I have no distinct recollection of that painful interview, except of the nerve-shock that the rattle of the warders' keys and the clang of iron doors produced upon me; and for the subject on which we talked, I have to refer to an evening paper published at the time, whose reporter accosted me as I was leaving the prison. "The convict appeared well," runs this report, "and was in fair spirits, and stated that he was now entitled to read, but was only allowed one book a week, which, for an omnivorous reader, was insufficient. He had lately been reading Pater and Newman. Mr. Sherard added, with regard to Wilde, 'I was much struck by his courage and resignation, though his punishment weighs terribly upon him.'" It appears, then, that our conversation went at once to literature, the one subject of our common interest. We were

in a vaulted room which was like the prison of a transpontine melodrama, and we were separated by a double row of stout iron bars. In the passage between stood a warder, who kept his eyes fixed on a noisy clock which hurried the spare allowance of minutes along. We both clung to the iron bars, and both for support. I noticed that his hands were disfigured, and that his nails were broken and bleeding; also that his head and face were untidy with growth of hair. And that is all that I noticed, for I looked at his face all the time, and if he was in some hideous uniform I did not see it. He was greatly depressed, and at one time had tears in his eyes. I affected a cheerfulness which I was far from feeling, and I fancy that I managed to comfort him a little, for I remember that I won a laugh from him in the end. And just then the busy clock hiccoughed out my congé, and I had to stagger away. The visiting-room is so

badly constructed that many things said in it between prisoners and their friends remain inaudible. I could not help thinking of what must be the feelings of people who pay a farewell visit in that room to a man under sentence of death, and who afterwards recall the fact—that he said many things which they could not hear and may now never know.

My visit took place on August 26th, 1895, and in my papers I find a letter from the Home Office, which shows me that I was busying myself, in my coma, on his behalf.

"HOME OFFICE,
WHITEHALL, S.W.,
10th Sept. 1895.

"DEAR SIR,—I am desired by Sir Matthew Ridley, with reference to your letter to Mr. ——— requesting permission to visit Mr. Oscar Wilde, to inform you that if Mr. Wilde is due for a visit and desires to see you an order would be sent. If, however,

you wish for one exceptional visit, it would be advisable for you to write here, stating the nature of the 'matters of most urgent importance' which you say you wish to communicate to him."

The matters, as I wrote to the Home Secretary, were the conditions under which a reconciliation could be effected between him and his poor wife. Divorce proceedings were then being urged upon her, and I felt that if she abandoned him, his ruin would indeed be complete. I had written to her repeatedly, and in the end had induced her to pardon him, and to promise to visit him in prison. It had been a matter of great difficulty, but all the trouble I had taken was amply rewarded by the following note, received some days after I had secured a fresh order to visit the gaol.

DEAR MR. SHERARD,—Your letter has only this moment reached me, but I came

over to London last evening in the hope of getting the permission to go to Wandsworth, and found it waiting here for me. I have written to the Governor, and I expect to see Oscar some time to-morrow, so I hope you will see him on Monday.

"I am not seeing anyone at all; but if you cared to come here on Tuesday and climb many flights of stairs, should be very glad to see you.—Very sincerely yours,

"CONSTANCE WILDE."

"I don't want anyone to know that I am in London."

On the following day I received a second letter from her. It showed me that I had not mistaken the poor girl's beautiful heart.

"MY DEAR MR. SHERARD,—It was indeed awful, more so than I had any conception it could be. I could not see him and I could not touch him, and I scarcely spoke. Come

and see me before you go to him on Monday. At any time after two I can see you. When I go again, I am to get at the Home Secretary through Mr. —— and try and get a room to see him in and touch him again. He has been mad the last three years, and he says that if he saw —— he would kill him. So he had better keep away, and be satisfied with having marred a fine life. Few people can boast of so much.

"I thank you for your kindness to a fallen friend; you are kind and gentle to him, and you are, I think, the only person he can bear to see.—Yours most truly,

"CONSTANCE WILDE."

I hurried to see her, and from the long conversation I had with her, I learned that her heart was altogether with him still, and that once his punishment was over, he would find a home with her and his children. I was much affected as I left. She showed

like an angel—an angel of beauty and of goodness—in the horrid night that hemmed me in. I was never to see her again; and as it came to pass, all my effort for his happiness and hers was to remain sterile.

My order from the Home Office entitled me to a long interview in one of the prison offices. I heard many uncomplimentary remarks about myself from the warders outside the waiting-room at the gate,—the gist of which was that people ought not to interest themselves in prisoners, but devise means for keeping their own persons out of gaol.

We had a long and pleasant talk together, though a warder sat with his eyes glued on my hands, lest I should pass aught of contraband. I found my friend greatly cheered by his wife's visit, and the prospect of the new life after his release. We stayed together an hour, and naturally drifted on to literature, but this topic seemed subversive

to the warder, and he interrupted the conversation by saying that if we had finished discussing "business," the interview must be held to be terminated. Whereupon to his great horror, I put my arms round my friend and pressed him to my bosom, and so departed.

Whilst I had been working to bring the unhappy husband and wife together, I had also been busy in another direction on his behalf. I had heard from Paris that one of his friends had written an article on the subject of his aberration, which, I understood, was to be an apology for, and a glorification of, "The Greek movement." I knew that the publication of such an article would be disastrous to his interests, and that one immediate result would be that his wife's new-won amity would be irrevocably alienated. I accordingly used the influence I possessed in literary circles in Paris to prevent the publication of the article. My

friends acted energetically, and the article, which was already in type, was withdrawn. A few days later I received from Naples, from the author, a letter, from which I extract the following passage :—

"The enclosed letter explains itself. I have written withdrawing the article. You no doubt mean what you do for the best, and you were quite justified in writing to me personally to ask me not to publish the article, though you might have worded your letter differently and less violently, with equal effect. You will allow that, immediately on receiving your letter, I wrote by return of post telling you that, as you thought what you did, I should withdraw the article. This fact should, I think, convince you that you ought not to have written as you apparently did to the editor of the Review, asking him to suppress my article. Such conduct on your part was exceedingly impertinent and in the

worst possible taste. As to the wisdom of my originally intended course, I still adhere to my own opinion, and Oscar shall decide the matter when he comes out and reads the MS. I will now make one request of you, and that is, to say nothing whatever about this matter to Oscar. I have consented, at your request, to withdraw my article, and in return you can do this for me. No possible good can be done by worrying Oscar about it, and you are certainly not in a position to give any true and impartial account of the real scope and purport of my article."

The same friend wrote to me later, when it had become apparent that my efforts were tending to reconcile Oscar Wilde definitely to his wife, and insomuch to separate him from former associates, to say that if by any words of mine Wilde's friendship were to be lost to him in the future, he would shoot me "like a dog."

In the meanwhile, other friends had been busy in endeavouring to secure his financial position, and when he "became due" for a visit in November, the ticket was sent to them, so that they might discuss business matters with him. But in compensation he obtained special permission from the Governor to write me a long letter. It was a great consolation to me, for its tone proved that he was coming well through his terrible ordeal.

XVIII

If I had been of the Catholic faith, the Trappe would then, in the state of my entire discouragement with life, have seemed to me the only refuge for my wounded spirit. Daudet, than whom no better counsellor in this world's things ever lived, kept writing to me to find in work the *dictame* that I lacked. But my newspapers I had abandoned; for the rest, I imagine they were not grieved thus to determine their relations with one who had pitted his private opinion against the opinion of the public; and as to fiction, which in the past had been the source of not inconsiderable income to me, my disgust at the cowardice of these, the hypocrisy of those, and the

many other detestable qualities of my contemporaries which this catastrophe had revealed to a nature by composition optimistic, would have disposed me rather to write about the uncleaner denizens of the Zoological Gardens than about men and women. And in this, Buffon and others had preceded me.

My notes for the Daudet book were with me, and now, when I turn over the printed pages of *My First Voyage*, I recall the many heavy hours during which I gazed, horn-eyed, at these papers, waiting for the impulse to take my pen in hand and fulfil the obligations of a sincere friendship—an impulse which only came many months after the time of which I am writing.

Whilst nursing my melancholy in a little cottage on the Westmoreland hills, I received a letter from the proprietor of a London magazine inviting my collaboration, whilst leaving me free to select my own

subjects. It occurred to me then that in visiting, in various parts of England, the most unhappy Pariahs amongst the workers of the Kingdom, in taking up their cause against Society which oppressed them, my Calvinistic conscience might find some of that blessed relief which by other forms of penance the Church of Rome provides for her children. The suggestion was made and accepted, and in this way my book *The White Slaves of England* came to be written. The Inferno into which I now plunged, afforded me the opportunity to assure myself that the material existence of an English prisoner compares favourably with that led by many hundreds of thousands of free men and women, whose liberty, chained as they are, for a daily average of eighteen hours, these to the nailmaker's anvil, those to the slipper-last, these to the sweater's sewing-machine, has pinions more closely clipped than those of men and

women in durance. These at least have time for exercise, some pause for recreation, and the assurance of sufficient sleep. And each sad sight, whilst it distressed, comforted me also, when I thought that the prisoner, whose sufferings never ceased to occupy my mind, was a happy, unshackled, and comfortable man, as compared to the people whose lives were now laid bare before me.

It was during this subterranean journey that I heard he had been moved to Reading Gaol, which, it appears, is a healthier prison than Wandsworth. I felt sorry to reflect on the reminiscences of his sunny youth, and the glorious and triumphant days of Oxford, which must have filled his mind when the chain-gang alighted at Reading, but I had no conception of the cruel outrage which had lent the bitterness of death to that journey. It appears that whilst the gang of prisoners to whom he was chained were waiting for their train at Wandsworth

Road station, exposed in their ignominy on the general platform—the Prison Authorities feel that they owe an occasional spectacle to the ratepayers—a British elector, who had been feasting his eyes on the faces, garb, and chains of the shivering crew, recognised among the prisoners one to whom all England owed a little gaiety, cried out, proud of his superior knowledge, and for the benefit of the other lookers-on, "By God, that's Oscar Wilde!" and spat in his face. And my friend's chains and gyves held him inert and passive under outrage so sanguinary.

I visited him for the third time in Reading Gaol, and though I could congratulate him on the fact that then merciful Time had gnawed away half of the load of heavy hours that had been laid upon him, I found him altogether crushed down. It was a painful interview in a degrading setting. He was in a kind of rabbit-hutch, over which

wire-grating was nailed, as though for the caging of an animal—noxious certainly, but of small force, and little to be feared—stoat, weasel, or such. The heavy iron bars of the visiting-room of Wandsworth Gaol, melodramatic as they seemed, invested the interview with a sense of danger, and wrapped the man beyond the bars in a kind of awful dignity—the dignity of the caged carnivorous monster.

The hutch was almost in complete darkness, and of my friend's presence I perceived little beyond his hesitating and husky voice. I think this darkness was one of the rare mercies of the prison managers, and was designed to spare to friends and prisoners the humiliation of these, the pitying pain of those. I am sure that Wilde was glad of it, for, further to hide his face from my eyes, he put a blue handkerchief over his mouth and cheeks. No doubt disfiguring growths of hair were thus masked. I found

him well informed of current events. Dumas, a common friend, had died two days before, and he knew it. I told him I should look to him for the world's news, and I heard a laugh in the dark depths of the wire cage. I had a private communication to make to him, and I began to speak in French, but was brusquely interrupted by the warder with a "Stow that, now! No foreign tongues allowed here." But I conveyed the information all the same in a roundabout way—the name which Mrs. Wilde had adopted. It interested me, as a point of psychology, to observe with what anxiety he asked what the new name was. In his prisoner's dress, in a shameful cage, his pride remained such that he was keenly desirous to be assured that his people had not assumed a name plebeian or ill-sounding. He approved, when I had conveyed to him what the name was.

After leaving the prison, very heavy at

heart, for his depression had seemed to me such that I began to fear for his sanity, and the dreary hours of waiting before I could take a train to London were the longest, I think, through which I have ever lived, to kill time I entered an hotel, and though the gaol air had destroyed all appetite, I allowed myself to be served with the tedious refreshments of a provincial English coffee-room. Opposite the table at which I sat was hung upon the wall the mighty carapace of the edible turtle, and on this was affixed a silver plate on which was engraved the inscription that, on such and such a date, "I" (the turtle) "had the honour of being killed and enjoyed in the form of delicious soup at a banquet of the local Conservatives, presided over by H.G. the Marquess of Salisbury, K.G." And I consoled myself with the thought that to those who desire immortality, the form it assumes should matter little.

I visited my friend twice more in Reading, and on both occasions in company. On the last occasion, which was three months before his release, he seemed to find the prospect before him more terrible than, for instance, he had done on my first visit, when it was one of twenty-one months of imprisonment to serve. I experienced the feeling myself later on when crossing the Atlantic in the steerage, for the purpose of my book, *At the Closed Door*. I found the last twenty-four hours in the devil's hole of 'La Champagne's' steerage-hold far harder to bear, far slower in their dragging horror, than the seven previous days and nights.

On this occasion he asked me to absent myself for a few moments, whilst he talked to the gentleman who had come with me. And in the grey gloom of the prison corridor where I waited till this conference, from which I was excluded, was over, it dawned upon me that my long friendship, fruitful as

it had been in sorrow, might reserve for the future another sorrow, and the disappointment of a wasted effort.

As I walked out of the gaol, having given my friend rendezvous under the sky of Liberty, I was accosted by a person who offered me a meat-tea, prayer, consolation, and the promise of a complete set of tools. He was the official of some Prisoners' Rescue Society, and had taken me for a released prisoner to be befriended.

I did not disturb his illusion, but whilst declining the proffered refreshment, with thanks, I said, "I am a writer, and the only tool I need is a pen."

As an after-thought I added, "and a little charity."

"Oh," said he, "we have no funds at our disposal for charity. We make no cash gifts."

But that was not what I had meant.

XIX

THE charity for which I asked was what was so entirely refused to Oscar Wilde after his release. In other countries, once a man has paid his debt to Society, as the formula is, he is held quits. Whoever in France brought up against Paul Verlaine that he had suffered imprisonment in Belgium for offences against the criminal law?—Paul Verlaine, who was publicly received and fêted in England by the very people who clamoured most loudly that Oscar Wilde was dead to Society and to literature, and might never be resuscitated! In England, if a man fall, he falls never to rise again. There are in the British a certain bloodthirstiness and a certain instinctive cruelty, which not centuries of

Protestant practice have been able to moderate. These qualities of the nation account for the facts that not only is our penal legislation the severest in the world, but that a conviction entails immediate and irreparable social death on the offender.

My remarks to the Rescue officer meant, that having paid my debt to Society, I only required that Society should have sufficient charity to allow me to ply my trade, to earn my living,—in other words, without remembering against me that I had been in prison, that it should judge my writings on their merits and market value alone, without prejudice as without favour. Oscar Wilde had all the more right to expect this of Society, that his past literary career, at least, was one of the purest of which English literature has record. I do not think that his bitterest enemies can find in any of his writings a single line which contains a

coarse suggestion. He was as moral in his writing as he was moral in his speech.

It would have been all gain to England, and a great gain, if after his release he had found encouragement to write. He had been through the furnace, he had drunk of the waters of death, and a great spiritual mission might have been his. I know that he left prison with a lofty ideal before him and a firm purpose. There were discharged on that morning together with him a dozen other prisoners, labourers and artisans. For these Society found tools and employment. On the man of genius, who could have added to her intellectual treasure-house incomparable wealth, Society turned her back.

He was put outside Wandsworth Gaol in his fumigated and frayed finery, with half-a sovereign—representing the earnings of two years' hard labour—in his hand, with no prospect before him but one of constant out-

rage, and the knowledge that his great talents could never serve him again. The bricklayer who had come out of the prison with him would be making bricks on the morrow and earning a sufficient living, whilst he was condemned to inactivity, to a moral starvation, more cruel to a man of his temperament than the actual privation which his circumstances threatened.

What an opportunity was lost here by some man of wealth, and therefore influence, with the true love of Christ in his heart, to save for great good a stricken and hesitating soul! But only the mists chasing each other over the grey common showed themselves to his searching eyes. Between him and his utter bankruptcy was the little gold coin that he held in his hand.

I was in some remote part at the time, and could not meet him. Other friends, however, were more fortunate, and welcomed him back to liberty. Also there was at once paid over

to him the slender balance of a sum of one thousand pounds, which had been deposited on his behalf, after his conviction, by a lady who had sympathy with him. The rest had been spent during his confinement, much on behalf of his mother. He might have had in addition to this a large sum, easily earned, if, in spite of all, his high self-respect had not remained to him. On the day before his removal, for discharge, from Reading Gaol, two American journalists had waited upon the Governor, and had asked him to make the following proposal to Oscar Wilde: In return for an hour's conversation with him, in which he should relate his prison experiences, they would pay him a large sum. I have heard that the amount promised was one thousand pounds, but I imagine that it was much less. Whatever the figure of the offer may have been, his prospective needs were such that it might have tempted another man. His answer, however, to the

Governor was a characteristic one: "I cannot understand, Sir, that such proposals should be made to a gentleman."

It has often occurred to me, that much of the bitterness manifested against him in the press, was caused by his contemptuous and unfair remarks about the profession of journalism. These were all the less excusable on his part that he knew Paris well, and had a great admiration for French litterateurs, and knew that there is not, and has not been, a single French writer of any eminence who has not passed through journalism, and always to his great advantage. I was always sorry to hear his utterances on this subject, not indeed because the profession is one I have followed, and hold can so be exercised as to be one of the noblest in the world, but because it seemed to me unworthy of him to share a prejudice, essentially English and vulgar, which arises from the fact that most

journalists in England, ill-paid and anonymous, are in a humble position in life, with no footing in that sphere of Society which he, first of all, should have despised. A saying of his went the rounds of Paris a year or two before his death, in which he formulated his utter disdain for journalists. An English newspaper-correspondent having for money acted in a public matter in a way which made him the object of the contempt of every decent man and woman in Paris, Wilde explained that the reason why he personally was not disgusted with the man's abject and treacherous conduct was that "journalists in England are never gentlemen and nobody, consequently, expects them to act as such, or to possess any sense of honour."

In the case of the prying American journalists, who desired to purchase the materials for an unsavoury sensation, I think that he acted very well. For the rest,

he never cared to speak, even to his friends, on the subject of his prison life. I never approached it except on one occasion, for I always acted towards him as if those two years had never existed; but if I had had any curiosity, he would not have satisfied me. "Now, Robert, don't be morbid," he said to me, at one of our first meetings after his release, when something I said seemed to invite the confidences of the prison-house.

From stray remarks which he let fall from time to time, one gathered that the system had been applied to him in all its rigour, that he had sometimes been punished, and that the warders both at Wandsworth and at Reading had been well disposed toward him. There was one at Reading who used to smuggle pieces of cake into his cell. He described graphically how, after it was eaten, he used to grope about on all fours hunting for stray

crumbs, which might betray the awful breach of regulations of a starvation system, and bring punishment on him and on his accomplice. He seems to have ingratiated himself with the warders by helping them to solve puzzles in a competition started by a popular weekly; and the story went that, thanks to him, one of the prison officials had won a grand piano. He was always ailing, and often so ill that he had to be moved to the infirmary. Here he was ever a favourite. His conversation and wit delighted the poor prisoners, and he, on his side, was pleased to have an audience, even such an audience. At such times the colour came back to his cheeks, and his whole person revived, and, seen then, he gave the illusion of being in good health and spirits. And such he appeared to two officials who were sent down from the Home Office, in consequence of a petition for his release on the ground of his ill-health, and who,

unknown to him, watched him through a spy-hole in the infirmary for half-an-hour. He was sitting on his bed and discoursing, and all the patients were in high delight. In consequence, the two gentlemen returned to London, and reported that C. 33 was in enviable physical and mental condition.

For the rest, he himself has related, in that wonderful article in the *Daily Chronicle* which appeared a few weeks after his release, and in which he pleaded that child-prisoners might be treated with some semblance of humanity, all the impressions of his prison life that anyone needs to know.

The two years of suffering and degradation left on him externally no trace, except a little nervous trick he had of arranging things symmetrically, if in disorder, before him. "I had to keep everything in my cell in its exact place," he said, "and if I neglected this even in the slightest, I was punished, and the punishment was so horrible

to me that I often started up in my sleep to feel if each thing was where the regulations would have it, and not an inch either to the right or to the left. And the terror haunts me still, and involuntarily my fingers make order where anything is disarranged."

He was fond of relating an incident of a dramatic nature connected with his stay in Reading. One day, whilst tramping his round in the prison-yard at exercise, he heard the man behind him say, "A strange place in which to meet Lord Henry." He turned round at the first opportunity and recognised in the speaker, an old tramp, to whom a year or two previously, during a country walk, he had given a half-crown. It was not explained how the old beggar had acquired his knowledge of "The Portrait of Dorian Gray."

I have said that on one occasion only did I refer to his prison life. It was once in Paris, where he had piqued me by charging

me with egotism and seeking always my own pleasure. I said, "Were those dreadful journeys to Reading and Wandsworth pleasant?" "My God, Robert," he cried, "and do you think it was pleasant for me to be in those places?"

The naïve egotism of his retort disarmed me, and I burst into a laugh.

XX

On his release from Wandsworth, he was met by friends, and in their company on the same day crossed to Dieppe. After lodging in the town for some time, having frequently suffered affront from Englishmen who recognised him, he moved into the country, close by, and leased a villa at a seaside place called Le Petit Berneval, about nine miles from Dieppe. Here he lived under his new name, Sebastian Melmoth, a name which soon became very popular in the Berneval district, where I found it to be synonymous for lavish generosity, and also for great kindness. It was noted by the peasants that Mr. Sebastian Melmoth was particularly kind to little children.

The hiring of an expensive villa was of course a reckless act, but it was a quite comprehensible one, after the two years of humiliation and suffering he had passed. For the rest, as long as the balance of the thousand pounds lasted, he lived so extravagantly that the various tradespeople of Berneval, from the livery-stable keeper to the hotel landlord, used to say that with only two other such customers as Monsieur Sebastian Melmoth they would have a very good summer season. This also I perfectly well understood. The only pity was that the few hundred pounds should have been so few. As long as they lasted he invited all his friends to enjoy his hospitality, and amongst others gave shelter for a long period to a young novelist who was temporarily penniless, and whom he had rescued from the clutches of an hotel harpy under circumstances similar to those in which Dr. Johnson befriended Goldsmith.

It was from Berneval that he first wrote to me, asking me to come and visit him, and as soon as it was possible I crossed to Dieppe. I found him sitting with a number of friends outside the Café Suisse. He wore a kind of Tam o' Shanter cap, the Basque *béret*, which did not suit him at all, and which must have attracted unnecessary attention. He was very cheerful and in high spirits, and his friends were boisterous. I heard that a few days previously a delegation of young poets from Montmartre had come down from Paris to present their homages to the master on his release, and that he had entertained them at a luxurious banquet at the Café des Tribunaux. I also heard that the Sub-Prefect of Dieppe had conveyed to him that if his presence caused the least scandal he would immediately expel him from France — an unnecessary and insulting menace.

The discipline and alimentary régime of

OSCAR WILDE, 1892.

(Photo by Ellis & Walery.)

To face p. 232.

prison life seemed to have benefited him considerably. I was particularly struck with this on the morning after my arrival at the villa at Berneval, when I accompanied him down to the beach where he was to take his morning swim. The fact that he took a swim in the sea every day was decidedly a cheerful one. For the purpose of undressing he had had a small cabin built for him on the beach, and that morning the door and the shutters had got stuck and refused to open. In the old days he would have said, "This is very tedious," and he would have sent for somebody to force the door. As it was, it was a pleasant and refreshing sight to see how Oscar Wilde, reputed an effete voluptuary, 'went for' that cabin—I can find no other word to describe his action—how brisk and vigorous he was with his hands, and with what promptitude his muscles mastered the opposition. He showed me that, from a physical

point of view, his imprisonment had benefited him. It had made him physically more manly. As a matter of fact, he had all the makings of an athlete in him, and this never impressed itself more strongly upon me than on the morning of which I am speaking, whilst I was watching him breasting the waves, a strong and skilful swimmer.

"I would like a photograph of him now," I said to a friend who was standing with me, "to show people in England that there's a man in him."

The life at the villa was agreeable. We used to walk out into the country and visit villages, the aspect of which has not changed since the Norman Conquest. One day, as we were on a country road, I pointed to an official notice that was painted up on a sign-post, "Mendicity is forbidden in this Commune," and I said, "Do you know, Oscar, I never see one of those notices without a *frisson*, as though it applied to

me—as though it could apply to me." "It has exactly the same effect upon me," he said. We burst out laughing as we looked from the sign-board to our comfortable and elegant attire and discussed the fears, mistrust and anxiety that the artistic temperament carries with it,—a sense of insecurity and danger that haunts the artist even in the hours of greatest prosperity and brightest prospect,—an eternal fear of the corregidor, such as haunts the wandering gitano. In which connection I asked him whether in former days he had not had a presentiment of the terrible things that were to come upon him, and he answered in the affirmative. A feeling of approaching disaster had haunted him all his life. It was nothing else, I said, than that feeling we have just discussed,—the feeling that makes you and me shudder at the sight of that warning to beggars. We know that we are hopelessly improvident, and we know also the

risk that improvidence brings with it, and we can easily fancy ourselves in a situation —only temporary, no doubt—where that notice might directly apply to us."

I remember that on the walk home that evening I described a dinner-party I had attended in Christiania, at which Bjoernstein Bjornsen and the Ibsens had been present, and I mentioned a custom they have at dinner-parties in Norway which had struck me. On rising from table the hostess stands at the door of the dining-room, and each guest, as he passes out into the drawing-room, shakes her hand and says, "Tak for Mand,"—"Thanks for the Meal." Wilde said nothing at the time, but later on in the evening, in the presence of numerous visitors to the villa, he denounced me for speaking ill of people. "He told me this afternoon," he said, "that he had been at a dinner-party in Christiania, and was greatly surprised, and almost shocked, that on tak-

ing leave of his hostess he was expected by a weird Norwegian custom to shake hands with her and to say that he had passed a pleasant evening." This was the first sign I had had that his humiliation and suffering had embittered him. It indicated what great moral and mental injury had been done him by the torture he had undergone.

A delightful study, full of books, pictures, and flowers, had been prepared on the ground-floor of the villa, but it was never used for work. He told me that his brain had been idle so long that he felt as if he could never work again. Yet, I believe, remunerative offers had been made to him after his release, and one of the leading London managers had come over to Dieppe specially to see him and to propose him some work. It was the adaptation of some French play—hack-work, in short; and I could quite understand how difficult it was for him to bend himself to such employment.

Like all artists, the money consideration was to him only secondary; the prime reward for labour that he looked for was the reputation, the increase of fame, that it could bring. In anonymous writing, to which thenceforward, as the British public would have it, he was constrained, all stimulus to endeavour, as far as he was concerned, was wanting. He simply could not produce under conditions to which excitement was lacking. For that his former triumphs had spoiled him, and long past were the days when he used at regular hours on regular days to plod up the Strand to his city office.

At the same time, anxiety as to his future was harassing him at every moment. Beyond the few hundreds which had come to him after his release, he had no resources whatever. The persistent efforts of his wife's family to alienate her from him had been so far successful, that a humiliating

period of probation had been imposed upon him. She would wait to see how he conducted himself before giving effect to the reconciliation which had taken place across the double row of iron bars in Wandsworth Gaol. At the same time, he was being plied with letters and telegrams by the one of his former friends whom it was most fatal for him to remember. These letters, these telegrams, petulantly clamoured for a meeting. Wilde knew that if he granted this meeting all chance of a moral rehabilitation would be lost, his wife and children definitely divorced from him, and his traducers of the past justified almost in the eyes of his very friends. During my short stay at Berneval there came from this source several telegrams, which kept my poor host in a constant tremor of irritation and perplexity. He wished for a new life, and yet there seemed no other prospect open to him but to fall back into the old associations which

had ruined him. Society had closed every door upon him, wherever British influence extended. Thus it was not an infrequent occurrence that he was insulted in Dieppe by being refused admittance to houses of entertainment which were visited by English people, and at the request of these. On one occasion he was invited to dinner by a well known artist. There were two other guests. The artist took his three friends to the best restaurant in Dieppe. They sat down at a table and called for the waiter. The proprietor of the establishment presented himself in his place. "I much regret," he said, "but I have dinner only for three. There is dinner enough for three, but not for four." It appeared that certain English people residing in Dieppe had told the landlord that if Oscar Wilde were ever served at his establishment they would withdraw their custom. And this is only one instance of the cruel insult to which this

unhappy and forsaken man was exposed at the hands of his countrymen.

His money was fast running out. At the time when I visited Berneval, he had come almost to the end of the few hundreds. I know that he used to complain of the carriage he had to pay on the telegrams from his friend, for Berneval is a long way from a telegraph office, and on each of these idiotic and childish messages three or four shillings had to be paid. That Oscar Wilde should have made a remark on this expense proved to me that his anxiety as to his financial position, if concealed, was very keen.

His nature revolted against the work that offered itself for him to do. "I would rather continue stitching sacks," he said. For the rest, dizzy with his new-gained liberty, and striving to forget in pleasure and excitement and a temporary luxury the suffering and privations of the past, the

constant humiliations of the present, and the awful preoccupation of the future, he was in no state of mind for literary production. And it was to literary production alone that he could look for any income.

But for his natural dignity and a strange respect for Society, to which, although he had spent his life deriding it, he felt a deference and an obligation which his supreme delicacy could alone explain, he could have exploited to great material advantage the notoriety of his name, and the universal and considerable sympathy which in tolerant Paris the story of his terrible sufferings had won for him. In Paris he was looked upon as the victim of British hypocrisy. Culpability, even where it was admitted, was discussed with a smile, and the punishment inflicted seemed, according to French views, so enormous, that in the eyes of the Parisians a very halo of martyrdom surrounded his head.

Had he cared to do so, he could have earned large sums of money by contributing, in his real name, to leading French newspapers and reviews. Thus, during my stay at Berneval, he was invited by Monsieur Xau, the editor of *Le Journal*, to contribute a weekly chronique, for which at least three hundred francs would have been paid.

But no. On the one hand, he was too proud, his self-respect was too great, to exploit for his profit a notoriety which haunted his every waking moment with a burning shame; and on the other hand, he felt that he owed it to Society, to British Society, to do nothing to keep alive a scandal by which that virtuous and dignified section of humanity had suffered so much in its lofty pride and spotless reputation. He would raise out of the slough into which he had been cast no beckoning hand. He had wrapped himself in a shroud as in a cloak; and though tingling with life in every fibre, contented

himself to play the dead. No individual ever manifested a higher, a more unselfish conception of his duty towards the collectivity. He had been branded a moral leper; and although none better than himself knew how cruelly unjust was this stigmatisation, he bowed to the verdict of his countrymen, and of his own free will withdrew to the lepers' island—to the awful lazzaretto where all was silence and night. And what recognition has ever been granted to him for this astounding sacrifice of self to the reputation of a country of which neither by descent, nor temperament, nor character was he a citizen? None. Prison had failed to degrade this prisoner. He left Reading Gaol improved, refined and exalted in all the qualities that distinguish the true gentleman.

During the whole time that he was in Dieppe and at Berneval, he was subjected to the espionage of private detectives in the pay of the father of the friend who was

pestering him with applications that he should fix a meeting. A mysterious individual was ever to be seen hanging about the villa, an evident victim to nostalgia and depression. One wet evening, observing this unfortunate person from the study window, and taking pity on his draggled, muddy and abject condition, I suggested to my host that we should invite him indoors and give him a cup of tea. But such a proceeding appeared irregular to Oscar Wilde. "It would look like vulgar bravado," he said, and the detective was left to amuse himself as best as he could under the dripping hedge in a very muddy lane.

It would have interested me to read the report that he sent next day to his employer, and what account he gave of the orgies in which the abandoned men who were under his observation had so shamelessly indulged. As a matter of fact, after a long discussion on literature, we had amused ourselves

for hours with a game which consisted in finding the names of celebrated people which begin with a given initial. There were three of us, and we took immense pleasure in this mnemonic tourney. Oscar beat us both by many points, and so excited were we that long after we had retired to our rooms our minds were occupied with the contest. Towards midnight the door of my bedroom opened and Oscar Wilde appeared in his dressing-gown.

"Xerxes," he said, and retired triumphantly.

I jumped out of bed and ran on to the landing and shouted,

"What about Xenophon?"

I was re-entering my room, when from afar a muffled laugh pronounced the words,

"Xavier de Montépin."

Although, as I saw him, he was always simple and unaffected, never by a single word or gesture recalling the Oscar Wilde

who had irritated Alphonse Daudet, there were, it appears, times during this period when his old fondness for posturing, for "startling the bourgeois," as Baudelaire put it, returned to him. I was staying last year at a hotel in Arques-la-Bataille, where, whilst he was at Berneval, he had frequently visited Ernest Dowson, the poet, and Conder, the most exquisite of modern artists, and the most vivid souvenir that the landlord had of Mr. Sebastian Melmoth was that one night, when he had slept there, he had aroused the household in the early morning, and had demanded imperatively the immediate slaughter of all the cocks in the poultry-yard.

He said, "All these cocks must be killed at once. They are terrible bores, and they prevent me from sleeping."

I said that I presumed it was a joke on the part of Mr. Sebastian Melmoth, but the landlord insisted that he was altogether

serious, and seemed to bear a grudge against him on this account.

But as I have said, I saw nothing of this side of his character; and when I left Dieppe, after a few delightful and most happy days, if my anxiety for his material future was disquieting, my joy was very great that degradation had not degraded but exalted him, that suffering had not greatly embittered him, and that both physically and mentally my friend had never seemed to me more alert, more capable, more serene, with the serenity of perfect power.

I did not know then what I see now, that the blow which had struck him down was a fatal one, and that his long agony had then already commenced.

XXI

An appeal which he made to his wife to shorten the period of his probation, and to allow him to return to her and to his children, was met by her advisers with a refusal, slightingly worded. The poor girl, I know, was never even consulted, and all that she heard of her husband's movements were the echoes of the stories by which the detectives at Dieppe justified their maintenance. At the same time, an offer of £3 a week was made to him by these people.

His funds had all run out, he had nowhere to go to, and all the while his friend was pleading, fretting, menacing. This young man was in receipt of a considerable allowance from his family, and in his letters he placed

his house, a delightful villa at Posilippo, and his purse at Wilde's disposal.

And so in the end the meeting came about. It took place in a hotel in Rouen.

The consequence was the natural one, and a few days later it became known that Oscar Wilde had resumed the friendship which had brought disaster and ruin upon him.

I heard of it in London, one afternoon when I was in the smoking-room of a literary club. With no other purpose than to distress me, two men, who were both the worse for liquor, called on me there and triumphantly announced that Oscar Wilde had gone to the Villa G——, and had there taken up his permanent abode.

I said it was a great and an unfortunate mistake on his part; that his action would everywhere be misconstrued; that his traducers and enemies would be justified in the eyes of the world, and many sympathies would be alienated.

A lying account of my words was immediately transmitted to Naples, and some days later I received from my friend a letter which distressed me greatly, for it showed me in what an unhappy state of mind he was.

"When you wish to talk morality—always an amusement," he wrote,—"and to attack me behind my back, don't, like a good fellow, talk so loud, as the reverberation reaches from the —— Club to Naples; also, it is easy—far too easy—for you to find an audience that does not contain any friends of mine; before them, play Tartuffe in the style of termagant to your heart's content; but when you do it in the presence of friends of mine, you expose yourself to rebuke and contempt, and of course I hear all about it."

There were four pages in this style, which was so strange, coming from Oscar Wilde to me, that I presumed things must be going very badly with him at the Villa G——. And though I wrote him an exact account of

what I had said, and insisted on the fact that nobody was present when I had spoken, he did not withdraw what was unkind and unjust in a letter of which I have not printed the most aggressive passages.

My presumption was the right one. Things were very bad indeed at the Villa G——. The English in Naples made the two friends feel that the past was not forgotten, and I heard sad stories of how Oscar Wilde was slighted and insulted whenever he showed himself where English people were. More than this, after the first few weeks his host's family decided to starve the young man into abandoning his friend. His allowance was stopped. On his side, Oscar Wilde was quite penniless. By selling their jewels, and even pawning their clothes, the two friends managed to prolong their resistance for a few weeks. I have heard accounts of this period, when every morning the excitable Italian chef used to clamour

hysterically for the materials for his art, which would be humorous were not the whole story so sad.

Short as were the days of luxury that Wilde enjoyed at Posilippo, they were the last that he was to know. Thenceforward his existence was to be the squalid and hazardous life of the impecunious Bohemian of letters in Paris. After leaving Naples he came to Paris and took a room in the fourth-rate hotel in an obscure street in the Latin Quarter, where he died. It was from this address that he sent me a copy of his "Ballad of Reading Gaol." It was accompanied by a peevish letter, which showed an unhappy state of chronic irritation—one of the symptoms of the brain trouble of which he died.

"I am sending you a copy of my Ballad —first edition—which I hope you will accept in memory of our long friendship. I had hoped to give it to you personally, but I

know you are very busy, tho' I am sorry you are too busy to come and see me, or to let me know where you are to be seen."

I could reproach myself with no neglect of him. There was, however, for me an own battle to fight. I had gone down with him. My best years had been lost—the question of mere existence now presented itself. At the time he wrote this letter I was hundreds of miles away from Paris.

On my return I went to see him, and heard of the wretchedness of his life. There were times when he suffered actual want; and on more than one occasion, his landlord having refused him admittance to his room until his bill was paid, he was actually without shelter in Paris, and but for the hospitality of friends, would have passed the night in the streets. Yet he never complained, he never accused fate or Society, or those who compassed his downfall, and to the very end his dignity maintained itself.

His last years were supremely unhappy. Poor, lonely, abandoned, he had little company but of those who hoped to prey upon his brain. Towards me he became more and more distant; the verminous parasites that clung to him fostered his wrong idea that, sitting in judgment upon him, I had condemned him. In melancholy and solitary peregrinations on the boulevards, which fifteen years previously we had trod so triumphantly, we sometimes passed each other in silence, with only a faint wave of the hand—like two wrecked ships that pass in the night. At such times on my side there was no other feeling but one of intense regret that, allowing myself to be cast down utterly at the time of the catastrophe, I had abandoned the arms with which then I could have served him best. I ought to have been wise as the world is wise, and then he would have had at least one friend who could have helped him.

I do not know what his resources were, but there were intermittent and brief periods of splendour, when I could hope to look up at him out of the depths, in the position to which everything entitled him. I believe he constrained himself to anonymous work, and I know for a fact that at least two plays which were produced during this period in London, and which were great successes, were almost entirely written by him. Also the last work he did before he died was a translation of Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Ce Qui Ne Meurt Pas.* The cruel irony of things! The dying man in the poor room of the poor inn writing of what never dies! The whilom apostle of Beauty constrained, as the hack of an obscure publisher, to paraphrase paradoxes on Beauty!

Of the circumstances of his death I know no more than what appeared in the papers: on the one hand, that it came mercifully, as to a child in its sleep; on the other, that of

all the thousands who were indebted to him for delight, or kindness, for the royal largesse of his royal head and heart, there was but one man with him when he died. Also that "*un cortége nombreux ne suivit pas son deuil*." I heard of his end by a hazard whilst in the squalid surroundings of a London slum, in the midst of the work which I took up first, as a mental relief, when he was in prison. The news came to me as a great grief, but also as a great joy. The very weariest river had wound safe to sea!

THE END.

APPENDIX

[From the *Gaulois* of Dec. 17th, 1891]

Translated by HENRY BLANCHAMP

THE day before yesterday M. Maurice Barrès had invited some friends to a dinner at Voisin's, in honour of the English poet, Oscar Wilde.

A very great French Society leader, who recently sent her portrait to the poet Oscar Wilde, wrote, in the form of a dedication, beneath the photograph of her stately person, the words : " To true art—To Oscar Wilde."

This French lady's tribute, in which appears the highest expression of refinement, will not seem at all exaggerated to those who know the fortunate being to whom the

words were addressed, or who enjoy the advantage of being familiar with his work.

Mr Oscar Wilde, who is leaving Paris to-day, where he had come for rest after the fatigues of the London season, represents the most perfect type of the Celtic artistic temperament, to which Great Britain has owed its best writers, its greatest poets. An Irishman born, he is the son of Lady Wilde, whose *salon* is one of the most famous in London, and who, under the name of "Speranza," has accomplished for Ireland, by means of her wonderful poetry, what Krasinski and Mickiewicz tried to do for Poland.

Through her he is the grand-nephew of Charles Mathurin, the author of strange romances, and the friend of Goethe, Byron, and Walter Scott. He wrote *Melmoth*, the romance which Balzac so much liked, which brought a *frisson* to Baudelaire, himself a master of *frissons*, and was not without

weight in the French romantic movement of 1830.

His father, Sir William Wilde, was a celebrated archæologist and distinguished man of letters.

Mr Wilde, after a brilliant course of study at Dublin, went to Oxford, where he carried everything before him.

It was from Magdalen College that he directed the æsthetic movement, which first drew public attention to him, of a rather contemptuous kind. It was, in point of fact, nothing but the protest of an essentially artistic soul against the ugliness of English life, of its deplorable accessories, and its worse than deplorable taste in everything relating to art.

* * * * *

A splendidly brilliant talker, witty sayings fly from his mouth, just as the jewels, which were deliberately ill-attached to Bucking-

ham's glittering doublet, were scattered about him in the Court of France. And if you knew how difficult it is to be witty in English! There are people who reproach him for talking overmuch, and compare him to Wencelas, whom Balzac ranked among the demi-artists who are satisfied with a kind of *salon* celebrity. Some want him to work more; they go out of their way to remind him that "continual work is the law of art," and that Canova used to live in his *atelier* like Voltaire in his study. Englishmen, in particular, reckon talent by the weight, and the number of pages, *i.e.* words, in an English novel contributes greatly to the measure of its success. In fact, a writer is judged there more by the quantity than the quality of his production, the fact being that either one is a grocer, or one is not.

But although Oscar Wilde is better aware than anyone of this national weakness of his fellow-countrymen, he has never dreamt

of reaching commercial popularity by a ladder of piled-up volumes. The only criticism that ever hurt him—and no English writer has been more virulently attacked by English critics—was a recent one in which he was termed a prolific writer. He is conscious of being far too much of a grasshopper to envy the halo of a laborious ant.

His work is among the most limited in quantity. He began with a volume of poems, six editions of which were taken up in three weeks. Such a success would have been noteworthy in Paris. It was simply marvellous in London, where there is so little demand for poetry that poets have to pass through the workhouse to arrive at Westminster Abbey. It was the more astonishing because the book, which was published in luxurious style, cost as much as a cartload of beef-steaks, whilst its contents, which were distinguished by a rare loftiness of thought, were far beyond the understanding of the

vulgar, materialistic mob that inhabits the West End of London. The critics gave vent to those gross stupidities by which they affect to despise what they cannot understand. They asserted that Oscar Wilde's book, like the poems of all young men of average ability, revealed the unconscious plagiarism of a writer who would never have written if he had never read. In one passage they pointed out the influence of Swinburne, in another, a reminiscence of Shelley, and, partisanlike, shut their eyes to everything original in the volume, both the brilliant colouring of the style, and its lofty thoughts and profoundly generous and noble feelings.

* * * * *

It might be said that the young poet was disheartened by this exhibition of malevolence on the one hand, and of despised popularity on the other. He was silent for many years, and produced nothing but a

few complimentary prefaces and some review articles. He married and went to live at Chelsea, that small corner devoted to the arts in the huge town devoted to bank-notes, and his house became the rendezvous of the few remarkable minds in contemporary England. He came to be considered in London as the supreme arbiter in all questions of art and elegance. Whilst duchesses were consulting him about the furnishing of their castles, and Bond Street tailors sought inspiration from him as from a new Count d'Orsay, poets, actors, and painters learnt to look upon him as the leader of the new artistic movement. You would meet at his house the *élite* of the artistic world. He was urged on all sides to break the disdainful silence he had imposed on himself. The arguments of his friends luckily prevailed, and Oscar Wilde again faced the English public and critics with his novel, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray.* It embodies a

harmony of psychology and romanticism. It is a study on Pleasure—a study, subtly delicate as the strength of a flower (to paraphrase Shakespeare), of the path by which it goes and the place to which it leads. It is a demonstration of the slow, graduated fall of a lofty soul, which the perversity of an artistic temperament devotes to the enjoyments it demands. It is a poignant satire on the unhappy condition of human life, through which an artist is ruined by means of the very things that make life endurable to him. In Dorian Gray there is a little of Gérard de Nerval, a little of Poe, and a good deal of Nero.

The publication of the book was like the explosion of a bombshell in a sleeping town. English hypocrisy, which seeks any pretext for working itself into a passion, raised shrieks of despair. Fancy! In the very fatherland of cant, a book was being sold on the stalls in which that abominable, that

damnable thing called Pleasure was analysed in all its phases. The spirit of the Puritans, who once forbade dancing and flogged actresses, is still quite flourishing in England, and that spirit was mortally offended by the book. Despairingly and terribly moral though it is, that book, which might be recommended for perusal to those very Puritans in place of innumerable tracts, was denounced as immoral, the all-conquering epithet by which English imbecility exiled Byron and Shelley, besmudged Swinburne, and murdered Keats.

Happily for art in England, the public has for a considerable time showed itself somewhat rebellious against the odious tyranny of cant, and the Puritans of the Press shouted their condemnation of *Dorian Gray* to ears which were deafened by their inarticulate clamourings. The book has now taken its place in the first rank of English novels, both for its incomparable mastery of style and

for its powerful and profound psychology. To those for whom, like M. Émile Zola, a novel is the most perfect expression of literature, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* is, and will be, an absolute masterpiece.

You must be familiar with contemporary English novels in order to appreciate at its true worth a volume which marks the dawn of the era of emancipation from that finical and insipid literature of amorous school-girls or governesses, of Anglican priests who, after having had tea and chattered through two volumes, in the third and last volume of the English novel conceive doubts about some point in their tedious faith; emancipation, in fact, from all the dull, mystical, brutalising, or bloodthirsty literature which flatters the worst qualities of the Anglo-Saxon people.

The poems, the novel, a volume of stories, and a collection of philosophical essays constitute the whole work of our "prolific" writer. For British grocerdom, it is very little;

for art it would be enough, were it not that he who has produced those masterpieces will be able to produce more. And our literature greatly needs masterpieces if it is to keep the place and retain the respect it has won (with what difficulty, too!) in the world. For which reason everybody who has this object at heart will follow the progress of Oscar Wilde with the deepest interest.

* * * * *

And now for a few words about the man. Like all good Irishmen, he worships France. He is never so happy as when he succeeds in escaping from London, and is able to spend a few days in Paris. Everything here is sympathetic to him. He loves your poets, your painters, and your actors, and counts his best friends among French artists. Condemned as he is to clubs, he adores *cafés*. If you want to see a happy man, you should see him seated in some corner of some great

boulevard restaurant, dining in French fashion and talking about French things with those who love France.

Exceedingly distinguished in appearance, he has a real cult for elegance, and passes for one of the best-dressed men in London, that capital of the Rubemprés. At one time he even indulged in some trifling eccentricities in this connection for which his adversaries—for he cannot have any enemies—are pleased to rebuke him. He is a confirmed, out-and-out smoker, and at his house in London always has a box of five hundred cigarettes on his desk, which is that on which Carlyle wrote his *History of the French Revolution.* Oscar Wilde would not be happy with less than five hundred. Perhaps that is the only case in which he limits himself at all, for he is as lavish with his money as with his witticisms, spending royally, and generous to excess. He loves Society, and Society loves him, and runs after him.

Oscar Wilde

To have Oscar Wilde as a guest at dinner or in a country house means an assured success for a London hostess. The English aristocracy, who hardly talk at all, are glad to listen to him. They struggle to secure his company, and, as a man of the world who is fond of elegance and refinement, he likes to associate with them. But he is especially fond of artists, and likes to say that the only people who interest him are those who are beautiful and those who make beautiful things. It is true he sometimes adds to these a third class, namely, criminals. But that is no doubt "to startle the fools," as Baudelaire, his favourite poet, replied to a prefect of police. And Oscar Wilde cultivates paradox.

ROBERT H. SHERARD.

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